

In These Times

INDEPENDENT NEWS & VIEWS

October 16, 2000

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Matthew Jardine reports

PLUS

Capitol Ideas:
Rep. Bernie
Sanders on
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In These Times

INDEPENDENT NEWS & VIEWS

"... with liberty and justice for all"

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Letters

Pop Goes the Culture

Joshua Rothkopf's summary of director Paul Verhoeven's career is a perfect example of what is horribly wrong with *In These Times*' coverage of pop culture ("Vanishing Act," September 4). Rothkopf mocks *ArtForum* for pronouncing the high-budget Verhoeven a "secret satirist," comparing this to declaring the "urinal in the gallery" authentic simply because the elite doesn't get it.

In Verhoeven's *RoboCop*, a supercorporation grows so oppressive that its flagship soldier is moved to turn against his masters; along the way, the moral corruptness of the corporate class is treated with biting parody as their system of automated population control goes awry and applies repressive police tactics to the wrong people—the elite. It is incredible that Rothkopf could watch such a film and come away thinking it was just a straight presentation of "corporate-sponsored brutality," cheering material for "closet fascists."

But Rothkopf's chronic refusal to take pop art seriously is typical of this magazine's culture pages. It is time we realized that *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Married ... with Children* have delivered social commentary on a scale our academic journals could never achieve. We should be evaluating the effects of popular media on the world, not wasting our efforts trying to prove that it is safe for the left to ignore the public.

Benjamin Wheeler
New York

Slang Harangue

Recently, I've been collecting examples of supposedly expert writing by foreigners who make fools of themselves by misunderstanding the locals. John Ghazvinian's free-associating review of *In Search of England*, much of it about the English expression "something that fell off the back of a lorry," is one of the best ("England's Dreaming," September 4).

Despite Ghazvinian's Oxford address, he never bothered to find out what the saying means; he just says that it "presumably" has "something to do with quick-witted scavengers with a knack for making personal capital out of someone else's flotsam." But any local could have told him that the expression is a common euphemism for stolen goods.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides this example: "If it fell off the back of a lorry ... Americans might describe it in CB English as a five finger discount (stolen merchandise)." Next time you review a book on English history and culture, find someone who knows what they're talking about.

David G. Stern
Iowa City, Iowa

Learn from History

The argument in support of Ralph Nader's presidential candidacy maintains that Al Gore is a bland centrist beholden to most of the same powerful interests as any GOP aspirant. However, the same could be said of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932. FDR was no principled liberal or progressive. He was a middle-of-the-road former New York governor. The Great Depression's overwhelming problems, along with all of the era's mass organizing fomented by the economic crisis, forced him to move to the left.

Likewise, in 1992, Bill Clinton was no principled progressive. He was a centrist politician who had flirted with liberalism early in his political career only to find that it led to defeat in Arkansas. Clinton, like FDR, would have responded to pressure from the left, he just didn't receive much. Had tens of thousands descended on Washington over an issue, Clinton would have been moved. Instead, Clinton stayed in the middle, for the simple reason that most Americans moored themselves there. When Clinton tried to move to the left early in his administration on issues such as gay rights in the military, public pressure forced him to pull back.

I think that progressives would do best to stick with the middle-of-the-road Democratic candidate, however soporific Gore may be. Although all presidents respond to big business and powerful interests, it must be remembered that Democratic administrations also react to mass pressure from the left, while Republican administrations are influenced by mass pressure from the right.

The Christian right and the economic conservatives learned from the Newt Gingrich debacle to keep their agenda under their hats and sing the centrist song. They are lying low, patiently waiting for the chance to control Congress and the White House so they finally can enact their agenda.

Al Gore is about as progressive as a large American constituency will permit. Let's all succumb to realism and vote Democratic in November.

William J. Volonte
Hoboken, New Jersey

Correction

Due to a technical glitch, an error appeared in Paul Krassner's review of *Steal This Movie* in the October 2 issue. A passage on casting the movie should have read: "At first Downer accepted the role, the story goes, but he demanded that Abbie's drug arrest be shot with actual cocaine. But it's not a true story. He simply turned down the part."

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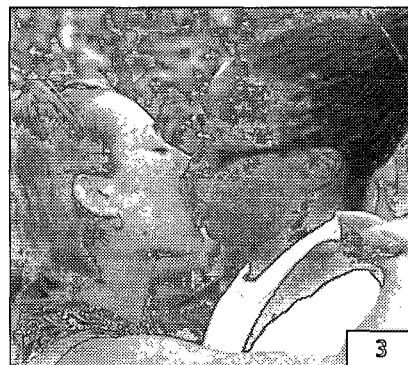
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Cover photo: Matthew Jardine

Open the Debates

By Salim Muwakkil

George W. Bush's ploy to change the format of the presidential debates was effective in one respect: It diverted attention from the much larger issue of opening the debates to third-party candidates. The Texas governor's tactic, combined with Ralph Nader's precipitous drop in the polls since the Democratic National Convention, has hushed discussion about debate participation.

At the other end of the political spectrum, Patrick Buchanan's push to get into the debates was detoured by his inability to win outright the nomination of the Reform Party. In fact, his heavy-handed attempt to hijack the party that Ross Perot built has split the group into rancorous factions. One group backs Buchanan, while the other has thrown its support behind John Hagelin, a physicist and devotee of transcendental meditation, who also is the candidate of the Natural Law Party.

Though badly crippled, Buchanan's presidential campaign nonetheless will be subsidized with public funds. He has been awarded the \$12.6 million in public funds the party earned when Perot polled 8 percent of the vote in the 1996 elections. However, most of the paying public will not hear what the candidate has to say because he too is blocked from the debates.

Nader and Buchanan are locked out of the debates because they have failed to attract at least 15 percent support as measured by the average of five media polls. (In recent polls, Nader is pulling 2 to 4 percent, while Buchanan is drawing 1 percent or less.) They also may lack ballot access in enough states to win the electoral college vote. These are two of the three criteria set for inclusion in the debates by the Commission on Presidential Debates. (The other is constitutional eligibility.) The purpose of the criteria, according to the commission, "is to identify those candidates who have achieved a level of electoral support such that they realistically are considered to be among the principal rivals for the Presidency."

Of course, the 15 percent threshold effectively excludes just about any third-party candidate. But that shouldn't be surprising given the pedigree and structure of the commission. Although it claims to be a "nonpartisan, nonprofit corporation," the commission is deeply enmeshed in party politics. In fact, it is a creation of the Democratic and Republican national committees.

While the commission boasts about not accepting money from government sources or political parties, it is sponsored by big corporations like AT&T, Sun Microsystems and Anheuser-Busch—which reportedly donated \$550,000 to sponsor an October 17 debate in St. Louis.

The corporate media is also complicit in this ruse. Rather than tagging the debate commission as a creature of the two-party duopoly, it perpetrates the fiction that the commission is truly nonpartisan. Networks and cable channels could refuse to cover the debates unless they were less exclu-

sive, or they could host their own inclusive debates.

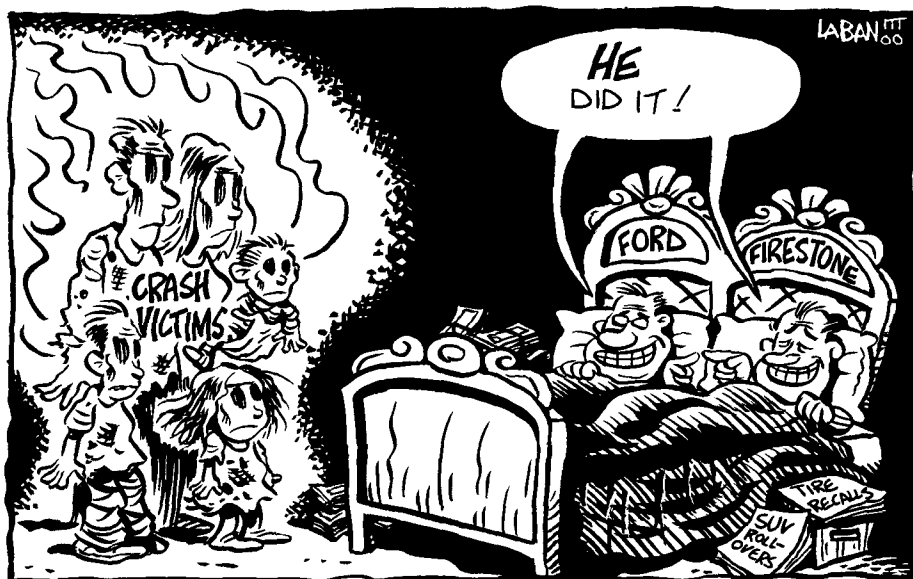
History demonstrates that independent candidates stand little chance of attracting 15 percent of the vote without the exposure of national debates. Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura is often cited as an example of a winner who polled in single digits before debating the major candidates. Another Jesse, Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-Illinois), has introduced a resolution to include candidates in the presidential debates if they attract 5 percent in the polls, or if a majority of voters support the candidates' participation. (In a July Fox News poll, 64 percent of respondents said Nader and Buchanan should be

Who knows? It might start a trend that allows voters to choose between more than the lesser of two evils.

included.) Several organizations are planning to protest the closed debates, with major actions planned for the first debate on October 3 in Boston as well as in St. Louis.

Certainly there is a need to protect presidential debates from frivolous distractions, but serious candidates like Ralph Nader and Patrick Buchanan deserve to be heard. Who knows? It might start a trend that allows voters to choose between more than lesser evils. ■

Terry LaBan



Queer Fears

Anti-gay backlash reappears
on state ballots this fall

By Hans Johnson

WASHINGTON—As the danger of wildfires fades across the West, a spate of blazes of a different kind is just igniting. Four states are bracing for battle over ballot measures that could undercut the rights of gays and lesbians. And in a fifth state, Vermont, the fall elections have become a virtual referendum on the first-of-its-kind state law allowing same-sex civil unions.

In Maine, voters will decide whether a nondiscrimination act in the offing for more than 20 years and approved by the legislature three different times will finally become law. Meanwhile, in Nevada the electorate faces Question 2, a regressive measure to outlaw recognition of same-sex unions. And in Oregon a diehard gang of gay-rights foes seeks to cut funding for public schools and universities that discuss homosexuality in the classroom.

Nebraska, where Initiative Measure 416 would bar same-sex civil unions and domestic partnerships, is shaping up as the fiercest fight of all. Passage of this measure would mark the first time that an anti-gay group has used any state's referendum process to bar health benefits for the same-sex partners of public employees. "A lot of us never thought it would get this far," says Beryl Aschenberg, an opponent of the initiative from Lincoln, Nebraska. "But then people started coming to our doors asking for signatures. I even found myself standing at the Shakespeare festival debating the issue with a teen-ager."

In every locale, the stakes are much higher than the legal status of gays. Referenda on gay issues get people out to vote—especially conservatives—like no other issue besides abortion. With that in mind, progressives in all four states fret that the measures could hinder their efforts to elect allies to the state legislature and retain two Democratic Senate seats.

The Nebraska initiative could jinx the Senate bid of former Gov. Ben

Nelson, a Democrat who faces GOP Attorney General Don Stenberg in the race for the seat that Bob Kerrey is leaving. In Nevada, Democrats are vying to hold on to the Senate seat vacated by Richard Bryan. Democratic candidate Ed Bernstein faces Republican John Ensign, a former congressman who came within 450 votes of defeating incumbent Sen. Harry Reid in 1998.

"Everyone here considers [Question 2] a tool to get the religious right motivated," says Steve Wickson, executive director of The Center, a lesbian and gay community organization in Las Vegas. As donations to the anti-gay Coalition for the Protection of Marriage soar into the high six figures, Wickson says, opponents, led by Equal Rights Nevada, have not tried to keep pace. Their late-starting

ed anti-gay researcher Paul Cameron to the state, only to see his past as a defrocked psychologist and advocate for criminalizing various sexual practices backfire on them. Late this summer, anti-gay activists announced plans for a fundraising visit to the state by gay-rights nemesis Jerry Falwell, who, still reeling from his accusations that the kiddie-show character Tinky Winky is gay, will do little to lure fence-sitters to the cause. And at the press conference to launch the campaign against Question 6, anti-gay activist Paul Madore picked a fight with the statewide Catholic diocese, which has come to support gays' pleas for legal protection from bias.

The gay-Catholic alliance caps two years of discussions between gay-rights



"There's no issue that will drive us back into the closet."

campaign relies mainly on word of mouth. "It's really a David-and-Goliath fight," Wickson says.

In Maine, gay activists likewise hope their coalition proves strong enough to propel Question 6, a nondiscrimination law already approved by the legislature and signed by the governor, to final passage. This year's statewide vote on equal rights for gays is Maine's third in five years. But besides a more organized grassroots base than in previous fights, Maine progressives pushing a "Yes on 6" vote this fall have another advantage: The opposition has image problems.

Leaders of the "no" camp were singled this spring when they invited discredit-

supporters, eager to restore their claim to a popular mandate after failing in a 1998 ballot showdown, and Catholic leaders, vying to regain clout they lost when voters last year rebuffed their drive to ban late-term abortions. In a state where at least one in five voters is Catholic, church support pays more than political dividends. Especially for gays in the closely knit small towns in northern Maine, "having the church's support alone makes a big difference in people's everyday lives," notes gay leader David Garrity.

Meanwhile, in Vermont, which lacks a statewide referendum process, partisan races have become a plebiscite on the

GERARD BURKHART/APF

issue of same-sex civil unions, which lawmakers pushed through in April following a mandate from the state Supreme Court. The public is poised to show its appreciation—or vent its frustration—at civil-union supporters in state legislative elections, including Gov. Howard Dean's bid for a third term, and the U.S. Senate candidacy of openly gay state auditor Ed Flanagan. In most races, the parties have become proxies for the opposing sides.

But a few cases defy the rule. Seventeen GOPers in the legislature—driven by principle and revulsion toward fire-breathing civil-union foes within their own party like Randall Terry—voted for the bill. As a result, many faced right-wing challenges in the GOP primary held on September 12. The verdicts were mixed. In the eight most closely watched races for state representative, same-sex union opponents managed to oust four who had voted for the legislation. But Thomas Little, a Republican who co-wrote the bill in the House, survived an upset bid. In the Democratic primary, state Rep. James McNamara, one of the few from his party who voted against the civil bill, lost to candidate Mark Larson, who said he would have backed it. And Flanagan, who had expressed concern that the civil-union flap might dampen his

approval rating, eked out a primary win over gay-friendly Jan Backus, who came up short in a 1994 race against moderate GOP incumbent James Jeffords.

In Oregon, the anti-gay proposal hearkens back to a bygone era in both its tone and title. The so-called Student Protection Act would take away state funding for any public school, pre-kindergarten to graduate-level, whose curriculum mentions homosexuality or bisexuality in anything but negative terms. It is the brainchild of the Oregon Citizens Alliance (OCA), a group of social conservatives who led a failed drive to hijack the state GOP in the early '90s.

In their most visible defeat, the OCA sponsored a 1992 statewide initiative called Measure 9 that would have declared gays "abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse." After a wrenching campaign that saw two gay people die in an attack by skinhead arsonists and the sanctuary of a gay-supportive Catholic Church defaced by "Yes on 9" graffiti, the OCA measure lost at the polls, drawing only 43 percent of the vote. Now, in a fluke of the electoral lottery, the current OCA measure will also appear on the ballot as Measure 9. The oddity has led longtime gay rights activists to dust off campaign signs packed away eight years ago and re-arm

after more than a decade of battle with a discredited but dogged foe.

With its focus on education, the current measure paves the way for a broader coalition than has confronted the OCA in the past. No sooner had Measure 9 qualified for the ballot—barely, after a second tally of signatures by the Secretary of State's office—than the 27,000-member Oregon PTA entered the fray against it. "They don't scare us anymore," says Greg Asher, a veteran of the political fights with the OCA. "What angers me today is how much effort and expense it requires from the gay community to counter these measures."

Still he urges activists not to panic and to focus on the big picture: "Don't fear the discussion. As it emerges, go into it. And remember: There's no issue that will drive us back into the closet." ■

Life or Debt

Promises to relieve poor countries are dwindling

By Nick Rosen

NEW YORK—"Everyone who holds a pledge shall remit the pledge of anyone indebted to him." Thus reads the simple passage from Deuteronomy that inspired Jubilee 2000, the movement to provide debt relief to the world's poorest countries. But now, with the effort's millennial deadline approaching, debt forgiveness is proving far more complicated than the Biblical mandate suggests.

One does not need the Bible to know that debt relief is, in the words of author Salman Rushdie, "the Christian thing to do." Debt relief proponents point to a 1997 U.N. development program study that found if the cash spent by third world governments on debt interest payments were reallocated to health and education, the lives of 7 million children could be saved every year. As it stands now, the amount spent on debt service by these countries far outstrips such social spending—a wrong by any moral accounting.

Justly, the G-8 member nations gave debt relief top billing at their June 1999 summit in Cologne, pledging \$100 bil-

Big Win for MOMA Strikers

Workers on strike for almost five months at New York's Museum of Modern Art scored a new contract on September 9 that awards them nearly all their demands. "We're all really proud and relieved," says Julia Corcoran, an editor at the MOMA. "It's been a long struggle, but it's been absolutely worth it."

The 250 employees are represented by the United Auto Workers and include clerks, librarians, editors and archivists, among others. The strike began on April 28, after longtime dissatisfaction with low pay and lack of job security. The median wage at the MOMA is only \$29,000, a pittance in Midtown Manhattan. The MOMA also planned major staff cuts and refused to guarantee jobs to other workers following its \$650 million expansion, which is scheduled to begin next year.

Management felt the sting of bad publicity as visitors, in the height of the tourist

season, faced picket lines at the MOMA's front doors on West 53rd Street. Then 150 prominent artists, from Robert Rauschenberg and Claes Oldenburg to David Byrne and Laurie Anderson, sent an open letter to the museum's directors endorsing the strike, which proved crucial in building support.

Under the new agreement, all employees are guaranteed jobs after the expansion. Staff with more than two years' tenure may opt for a severance package. The contract also secures many other demands, including a 3.5 percent average annual wage increase, improved benefits and tuition reimbursement. What's more, all new employees will automatically become UAW members.

"I can't believe we won on every issue," says Jennifer Roberts, a MOMA librarian. "I'll have to change my outlook on life." **Kristin Kolb-Angelbeck**

Spokesman for Saboteurs

By Jonathan Walters

Craig Rosebraugh, in a hip cowboy shirt, pearl buttons flashing in the sun, wipes flour off his hands after a long night baking vegan muffins. The 27-year-old Portland animal rights activist then talks about how fate in the form of a fax landed on his desk.

In May 1997, the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), a radical animal rights group, needed help publicizing their claim of responsibility for an overnight break-in at an Oregon mink farm that released the captive animals. Rosebraugh picked up the phone and his life took a turn that would bring him an interview on CBS, multiple calls to testify before federal grand juries, and a FBI raid on his home.

"I took it upon myself to release that information to the press and public," he says, "to make them realize it was not a random act, but had a clear political and social motive." ALF realized they had a friend in Rosebraugh, and he became the exclusive spokesman for the group, destroying all faxes he receives, incinerating any letters and erasing all e-mails, before passing on the information to the press.

In October 1998, a similar group, the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), contacted Rosebraugh, saying it had burned down a ski resort expansion in Vail, Colorado, which was encroaching on endangered lynx habitat. He didn't hesitate in calling the press. And he did the same last Christmas, when ELF took responsibility for torching timber company Boise Cascade's headquarters in Monmouth, Oregon.

ELF and ALF do not practice civil disobedience, they are purveyors of the most radical and controversial

methodology in the environmental movement: the destruction of corporate property, or, as Rosebraugh puts it, "economic sabotage."

To the frustration of law enforcement agencies, not a single member of ELF or ALF has been caught. Not surprisingly, authorities have focused on



MARK BARNES

Rosebraugh, as the public face of a faceless organization. In February, the FBI raided his home and grabbed his computer and filing cabinets. At an April appearance before a federal grand jury in Portland, he discovered that his phone had been bugged for the past three years.

Rosebraugh claims he does not know the identity of a single person doing these actions, and though he supports them, he has never taken part. The truth is probably less cut and dried. "You run a lot of personal risk for doing this," he says. "I hope and dream that these actions will increase, not only in the frequency but in their intensity.

Because I believe that these type of actions are at the core of social change in this country."

He adds: "In school you are taught that there are times maybe where civil disobedience is appropriate. What we didn't learn about in school is the direct action movements that accompanied these other social movements, and their actions served to be so radical and out there as to push the mainstream paradigm of thought closer and closer to the social movements' way of thinking. After 10 years of working in various movements, I've come to the conclusion that what is going to work right now, in this day and age, is direct action in the form of economic sabotage."

Rosebraugh's main adversaries, however, are not the government, but the media and other environmental groups. He chastises the media for coining the term "ecoterrorist," even though no humans have been physically harmed in an attack by ELF or ALF, both of which he says adhere to a "code of nonviolence to humans and animals."

And he is disappointed in other environmental groups for condemning the sabotage—a condemnation that has been nearly universal. In the wake of the Vail destruction, the Environmental Defense Fund's Fred Krupp told the *New York Times*, "Undermining the rule of law cannot possibly advance the cause of environmentalism. Regardless of what one's view of the lynx is, or the expansion, the arson at Vail is an outrage."

Rosebraugh responds: "It would have been easy for them to come out and say, 'We don't agree with the tactics, but as of right now we can see that people are going to do whatever they can to further the issue.'"

And for ELF, according to Rosebraugh, that issue is protecting the earth "for not only our future generations but for other animal nations." ■

Hugo Chávez's Dangerous Mix

With so many presidents, prime ministers and dictators visiting New York in early September for the U.N. Millennium Summit—it was billed as the biggest gathering of heads of state in history—more than a few of those world leaders felt downright ignored by the American mass media.

After all, with proven show-stoppers like Cuba's Fidel Castro and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat around, what reporter wanted to be left behind to cover Hasina Wazed, the prime minister of Bangladesh, or Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, president of the Maldives, or even Britain's Tony Blair?

No matter what publicity plays the foreign dignitaries tried, Castro and Arafat kept attracting most of the media attention, and the longest applause, wherever they went. The reason is simple: These two have defied U.S. government for so long, and have done it so successfully, that they're now practically elder statesmen of the opposition. Even many Americans who detest the pair see them as almost comfortable adversaries. Besides, deep down inside, they know that neither leader poses any threat to the American consumer's way of life.

The same cannot be said of the rising new revolutionary star of Latin America, President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela.

In the less than two years since he was elected, the 46-year-old former military officer has sparked a remarkable social revolution, one being felt both in his own nation and on the world scene. And Venezuela is far more important to the United States than Cuba or Palestine. Beneath its soil lie 73 billion barrels of oil, the largest proven petroleum reserves in the Western Hemisphere.

Chávez was jailed in 1992 after staging a failed coup against the government of Carlos Andres Perez. He served a few years in jail, but rebounded quickly after huge corruption scandals drove Perez from office. In December 1998, Chávez was elected by a landslide on a populist agenda.

Since then, he has spearheaded an upheaval in Venezuelan society, includ-

ing the writing of a new constitution that goes against many of the neoliberal policies favored by the United States. The constitution forbids the privatization of Venezuela's social security, health systems or the government-owned oil company, and it replaced the old two-house con-



gress, comprised largely of the nation's elite class, with a new national assembly.

The Chávez government also has decreed a 44-hour work week, down from 48 hours; it has started a huge FDR-type public-works program to reduce the high unemployment rate; and it has forced the corrupt trade unions to allow their members to elect leaders directly. In wildly popular weekly radio broadcasts, Chávez answers citizens' questions and resolves their problems. He even has visited prisoners in Venezuela's notorious jails and promised to address their complaints.

Most important to the rest of the world, Chávez and his new oil minister, former left-wing guerrilla fighter Ali Rodriguez Araque, have single-handedly put teeth back into the OPEC oil cartel. They successfully convinced the other OPEC nations—as well as some key non-OPEC countries like Mexico, Russia and Norway—to restrain or cut back their production instead of secretly vying to exceed their quotas. The new discipline has led to a tripling of the international price of oil in less than two years, which in turn has sparked massive protests across Europe and outcries from the United States over the escalating price of gasoline and home heating oil.

For the first time in decades, the industrialized countries have gotten a taste of the same medicine that cartels

controlled by the West regularly force upon the Third World. OPEC, which practically had been declared dead by the great powers as its share of world oil production dropped, once again is being watched anxiously by the politicians and central bankers in London, Washington and Tokyo.

At the end of September, as a sign of that renewed strength, Chávez will host the second-ever summit of the OPEC heads of state, on the 40th anniversary of the cartel's founding. Only five years ago, Venezuela was the world's largest supplier of oil to the United States. Today, thanks to the Chávez strategy, it ranks third behind Saudi Arabia and Mexico—but Venezuelans are earning considerably more revenue from that reduced production. With those revenues, Chávez hopes to finance his promises to the people.

Thanks to his peaceful revolution and cunning oil strategy, Chávez has become the world leader who makes the State Department most nervous these days—though you wouldn't know it by reading our national press, which usually goes only where the State Department sends

His peaceful revolution and cunning oil strategy make the State Department nervous.

it. Meanwhile, no doubt, some enterprising souls in obscure corners of the CIA and Pentagon are already hard at work preparing seamy contingency plans for Chávez. We can pretty well guess the contours of these subversions of democracy from our government's past practice in places like the Chile of Allende, the Haiti of Aristide or, to go back even further, the Guatemala of Arbenz.

If so, Bill Clinton's \$1.3 billion aid package for the drug war in Colombia, which positions gobs of U.S. military advisers right next door to Venezuela, could be seen in another way—as a security deposit on a far greater future investment.

Oil and revolution, you see, are a dangerous mix. ■

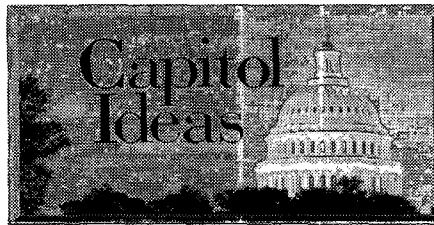
Can Congress Kick its Habit?

Nothing exemplifies the power of big money in Washington more than the pharmaceutical industry, which spends more money on campaign contributions and lobbying than any other industry. When Congress reconvenes this fall, the American people will see whether their elected leaders have the courage to stand up to all of that political muscle and pass legislation that would significantly lower the price of prescription drugs.

Right now, both political parties and their presidential candidates are blanketing the airwaves with their plans to provide prescription drug benefits to senior citizens. The Republican plan, which passed the House, is primarily a poll-driven sham that would do little, if anything, to address the very serious crisis facing millions of seniors who are unable to afford their medicine. The Democratic House plan, which provides a prescription drug benefit under Medicare, is a more serious proposal but would still require many seniors to pay a substantial amount for their drugs. Unfortunately, but not too surprisingly, neither proposal addresses the most important question: Why is it that the same prescription drugs in this country cost far more than in any other country?

That is why, more than a year ago, I joined with Rep. Jo Anne Emerson (R-Missouri) and Rep. Marion Berry (D-Arkansas) in introducing tripartisan legislation that would allow U.S. prescription drug distributors and pharmacists to re-import drugs from abroad at drastically lower prices, so long as the drugs met rigid FDA safety standards. Pharmaceutical manufacturers sell their products in many other countries for 30 to 50 percent less than in the United States. By eliminating the federal law that gives these manufacturers a monopoly over prescription drug imports, American consumers will be able to take advantage of the lower prices abroad and the cost of prescription drugs will plummet in the United States at no expense to the

taxpayer. With the savings from our legislation, Vice President Gore's plan to pay 50 percent of Medicare beneficiaries out-of-pocket prescription drug costs could actually pay for 80 percent of those costs at no additional charge to taxpayers.



This summer, strong bipartisan majorities in the House and the Senate voted to add legislation similar to our proposal in this year's Agriculture Appropriations Bill. Despite the bill's strong congressional support, however, the pharmaceutical industry is working overtime to defeat or neutralize it when it comes before the Agricultural Appropriations House-Senate conference committee this fall.

The drug companies have launched an all-out, multimillion-dollar lobbying and advertising campaign to protect their lucrative monopoly. Not surprisingly, there has been a deafening silence on this issue from the Republican congressional leadership, whose party has received more than \$6 million from drug companies during this election cycle. The White House, whose party has received \$2.4 million from the industry, also has showed a marked lack of enthusiasm for the bill. In other words, despite the strong desire of the American people to see lower prescription drug prices and the support of the vast majority of Congress for serious legislation to accomplish that goal, the pharmaceutical industry could win out because of the hold it has over the leadership of both parties.

People may wonder how, in a supposed democracy, a single industry can

wield such incredible power. Let me tell you: The drug companies constitute the most profitable industry in America—enjoying more than \$27 billion in profits last year. With those resources they can spend unlimited amounts to defeat efforts to lower the cost of prescription drugs.

The industry's lobbying efforts are unparalleled. Public Citizen estimates that the drug companies have close to 300 paid lobbyists on Capitol Hill—one for every two members of Congress. Last year they budgeted \$65 million for political advertising to prevent Congress from passing meaningful prescription drug reform. As I write, they are spending millions on deceitful television, radio and full-page newspaper ads all across the country to defeat the re-importation initiative.

But even with all this money, they cannot justify what I have seen with my own eyes when I made two trips to

Last year drug companies spent \$65 million on advertising to prevent meaningful drug reform.

Canada with my Vermont constituents to purchase prescription drugs. Vermonters were able to save thousands of dollars on the medicine they needed by going over the border. One of the starkest examples was Tamoxifen, a widely prescribed breast cancer drug, which sells for a 10th of the price in Canada that it sells for in the United States.

The American people are entitled to lower prices for their prescription drugs, but even more importantly, they deserve to know that the political leadership of our nation cannot be bought. ■

Bernie Sanders of Vermont is the only elected independent in Congress. "Capitol Ideas" will appear regularly in In These Times as a forum for progressive leaders to share their policy ideas.

EAST TIMOR: UP FROM GROUND ZERO

By Matthew Jardine

DILI, EAST TIMOR

Do you have any photos of my husband?" Senhora Quintas asks me upon learning that I had met her husband, pro-independence leader Verissimo Quintas, during a 1992 visit to East Timor. Unfortunately, I did not have any photos, nor did she.

On August 28, 1999, less than a day and a half before the start of a U.N.-run referendum, in which East Timor's citizens voted overwhelmingly in favor of independence, armed Indonesian soldiers surrounded her home in the town of Lospalos and opened fire. Then, before burning down the house, members of the local militia rushed inside and hacked to death Verissimo with machetes.

Countless East Timorese have similar stories. Indonesia's 1975 invasion and occupation of the former Portuguese colony was horrific, killing more than 200,000 East Timorese, about one-third of the pre-invasion population. As a parting act following last year's vote for independence, the Indonesian military and allied militias launched a wave of terror, destroying more than 80 percent of the territory's buildings and infrastructure, forcibly deporting about 250,000 people to Indonesia, raping untold numbers of women and killing an estimated 1,500 people—to create what they called "ground zero."

The U.N. Transitional Authority in East Timor (UNTAET) now governs the territory, helping to rebuild the country and to prepare it for independence. Undoubtedly, UNTAET and the international community have made big strides here: The majority of East Timorese forced into Indonesia in September 1999 have returned home; the electrical system is working again in most major towns; tens of thousands of people have received emergency food aid; a national health care system is now functioning; and the vast majority of East Timorese youth are back

in school. These successes are all the more impressive given that, in the wake of the final terror campaign, the country lacked phone and electrical systems and had no administrative apparatus after Indonesian authorities departed.

Yet the majority of people in East Timor often cannot meet their most basic needs. Thirty-five percent of the population suffers from food insecurity, according to a report by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, and an estimated 80 percent of the population remains unemployed. And while the U.N.-led international peacekeeping force has largely eliminated the immediate security threat of the Indonesian military and its militia forces, these groups continue to hold much of the population hostage—psychologically as well as physically.

Jose, a cab driver in Dili, cries as he tells me how his family was forced into Indonesian West Timor after the independence vote. Many of them are still there, along with approximately 120,000 other East Timorese held in camps controlled by the militias. Meanwhile, according to the United Nations, several dozen militia groups crossed the border in mid-August, causing many East Timorese villagers to flee into the forest.

Militia members also have repeatedly assaulted U.N. humanitarian workers while Indonesian soldiers stood by. In a particularly horrific incident, machete-wielding militia members attacked a U.N. office in Atambua, West Timor on September 6, hacking to death three foreign U.N. workers and then burning their bodies. Over the past few months, military forces crossing from West Timor have fired on U.N. peacekeeping troops on numerous occasions, killing one and wounding two others. The United Nations describes the assailants as "militia," but at least some of the attackers were elite military troops, according to one U.N. official who read the confidential intelligence report on the killing of a New Zealand soldier in July.



PHOTOS: MATTHEW JARDINE

Hello Mister" is how East Timorese frequently greet foreigners. It is also now the name of a Western-style, Australian-owned supermarket that opened in Dili in late July. Catering to the well-heeled, the air-conditioned "Hello Mister" is already a favorite destination of the "expats" who drive around the territory's capital in their white, four-wheel-drive sport-utility vehicles. The supermarket is one of myriad signs of the gaping social distance that has emerged between locals and foreign officials.



This graffiti, left by Indonesian soldiers, reads: "Go ahead and have your independence, but you will have to eat rocks for six months."

Probably the most blatant manifestation of this phenomenon is the Hotel Olympia, a giant floating hotel in the harbor across the street from UNTAET's headquarters. With rooms costing more than \$160 per night, the United Nations has pumped millions of dollars into the foreign-owned venture to put up members of its international staff, rather than using the money to rebuild one of East Timor's destroyed hotels. Indeed, UNTAET has no policy to favor East Timorese producers and service providers.

At the same time, in the name of preventing inflation in the local economy, UNTAET pays its East Timorese staff an average of \$5 a day, while international staff receive New York-level salaries in addition to a daily living allowance of more than \$100. Not surprisingly, a certain level of resentment toward expats has developed among many East Timorese. "There's no shortage of cold beer for sale," complains Francisco, a Protestant minister, "but there is a shortage of affordable construction materials so people can rebuild their houses."

Even Mary Robinson, the U.N. Commissioner for Human Rights, criticized the international community in East Timor during a recent visit to the territory. "There is not that empathy of really understanding how much the people of East Timor suffered," she said.

While this is a generalization, there undoubtedly is a certain arrogance toward the East Timorese on the part of U.N. officials, who have excluded locals from the UNTAET decision-making process. In June, East Timorese Nobel Peace Prize recipient José Ramos-Horta called for all UNTAET district administrators, who essentially serve as governors of the territory's 13 districts, to be replaced by East Timorese. Even in small towns, UNTAET's local administrators are people from places such as Norway, Uganda and Sri Lanka.

To its credit, UNTAET has announced plans to appoint locals as deputy district administrators and, gradually, as district administrators to take over from international officials. And more recently, UNTAET has created a cabinet in which East Timorese occupy four of the eight positions. Nonetheless,

the international staff still calls the shots. Indeed, by making UNTAET a governing mission rather than an assistance mission, the international community has disempowered the East Timorese and further undermined the territory's long-term prospects.

The most obvious example of this institutionalized arrogance is the U.N. treatment of FALINTIL, the East Timorese guerrilla army that played a heroic role in liberating the country. FALINTIL is, in some respects, far better equipped to patrol the territory than peacekeepers who have little knowledge of the terrain and are unable to communicate with the local population. Yet rather than allowing FALINTIL to spread throughout the country and to work alongside the international peacekeepers, the United Nations confined it to the town of Aileu. Only in late August, in the face of the peacekeepers' inability to stop increasing militia and military incursions from West Timor, did UNTAET allow 67 FALINTIL members to

work alongside the international force.

Nevertheless, East Timor is progressing toward full independence. An election for some sort of constitutional assembly is tentatively planned for late 2001. This should lead to a formal transfer of power to an East Timorese government by the end of next year. Many of East Timor's political leaders hope to develop off-shore oil and natural gas deposits, increase production of the territory's high-quality organic coffee (a crop whose value is notoriously volatile in the international market), and establish a successful tourism industry to provide a strong economic base for the country.

But it is doubtful the post-independence government will be able to meet the basic needs of its population given the destruction and trauma the territory has suffered and the insufficient resources provided to rebuild. Indeed, representatives of the international community seem resigned to what they see as the inevitable future poverty of the country. As an Australian official in Dili explains, "This is going to be a very poor country for a very long time, and we cannot build what the East Timorese cannot then afford to run."

The international community is letting such fatalistic assumptions guide its work in East Timor. Thus, for example, in a country where countless numbers have been tortured and raped and witnessed unspeakable atrocities, there is still no national mental health program. And while an estimated 80 percent of children have intestinal parasites, no program exists to combat these infections. Such needs are a result of Indonesia's war and occupation, crimes abetted by many of the same countries that are now East Timor's principal donors. In this regard, these countries have an obligation to provide much more.

While the Indonesian military and the political elites behind it are most directly responsible, the destruction of East Timor couldn't have happened without the complicity of the world's powerful, most notably the United States. From December 1975 through mid-September 1999, Washington gave billions in economic assistance, sold more

than a billion dollars worth of weaponry, and provided significant military training and aid to Jakarta. And Washington prevented the United Nations from taking any meaningful steps to enforce its resolutions demanding that Indonesia withdraw from East Timor. It was not until September 1999, in the face of strong congressional and grassroots pressure, that the Clinton administration cut military ties and suspended assistance to Jakarta.

It is for such reasons that dozens of East Timorese gathered in front of the local U.S. diplomatic mission on July 4. Calling themselves the 1975-1999 Alliance for Justice, the

the time of their commission. In other words, the amendment effectively disallows the prosecution of individuals for war crimes or crimes against humanity committed in East Timor or Indonesia before now, because such crimes were not defined in Indonesian law.

While Jakarta's stonewalling may invigorate efforts to establish an international tribunal, the U.N. plan, even if implemented, would still fall far short of what is needed. Most egregiously, there is no provision to investigate and prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in East Timor prior to 1999. And although UNTAET has begun establishing courts in East Timor that could potentially try those accused of such crimes, the courts only have jurisdiction within the territory—while almost all of the key players involved in the terror are outside the country, mostly in Indonesia.

The Clinton administration has made some strong statements calling upon Jakarta to establish a credible and transparent process to prosecute Indonesian citizens charged with gross human rights abuses in East Timor, and has threatened to support the establishment of an ad-hoc international tribunal if Jakarta does not do so. But the administration's vision of such a tribunal would only cover war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Indonesia in East Timor from January 1 to October 25, 1999, when international troops entered the territory.

It's easy to become depressed about the future prospects of East Timor. But it's also important to recognize the dynamism and creativity of the country's myriad activist groups and political movements as well as the strong international solidarity movement that supports them. Most importantly, we must remember how far East Timor has come in such a short time. Within the last year, the country has emerged from one of the most oppressive and brutal occupations in recent history. As many East Timorese told me, they may not have a house or a job, but at least they can talk freely and walk down the street without fear.

The importance of this new reality was evident when I visited Ana Lopes at the ruins of her family home in the most devastated neighborhood of Dili. Unlike a year ago, when militia regularly terrorized her family, she did not cry when she spoke to me. She now talks in a voice louder than a faint whisper, and no longer nervously rocks back and forth in her chair during an interview.

When I left, she walked me out of the house onto the street—something she never did during my many visits last year due to the fear of enraging the militia types who stalked the neighborhood. Perhaps most moving was when Ana proudly showed me the corn she is growing in a garden across the street from her house, amidst the ruins of the militia post—a beautiful symbol of the new order growing from the rubble of a very ugly past. ■

Matthew Jardine recently returned from three months in East Timor. He is the author of *East Timor: Genocide in Paradise* (Odonian Press and Common Courage Press) and the co-author of *East Timor's Unfinished Struggle: Inside the Timorese Resistance* (South End Press).



demonstrators made five demands of Washington: the release of all U.S. government documents relating to East Timor; the establishment of an independent commission to investigate and publicize American complicity with Indonesia's crimes in the territory; an official apology for the U.S. role; U.S. reparations to the people of East Timor; and active support for an international tribunal to investigate and prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in East Timor from 1975 to 1999.

In Response, W. Gary Gray, the principal U.S. diplomat in Dili, opined that "it's better to concentrate on the future than rehash the past." But it is exactly the past that East Timor and those that are responsible—directly and indirectly—for the country's destruction must deal with to ensure that the former Portuguese colony and its people can recover from its recent history.

Efforts to bring those parties to justice have been woefully inadequate. The U.N. International Commission of Inquiry on East Timor called for the establishment of an ad-hoc international human rights tribunal in late January, but the United States and its allies on the U.N. Security Council instead acceded to Jakarta's demands that Indonesia have the chance to prosecute the accused prior to any decision to proceed internationally. More than six months since the Security Council called upon Jakarta to bring those responsible for last year's violence to justice "as soon as possible," there has been little progress. In mid-August, Indonesia's parliament passed a constitutional amendment prohibiting prosecution for crimes that did not constitute an offense at

WHAT THE MEDIA ISN'T TELLING YOU

About Bertelsmann's Hidden Nazi Past In an exposé trumpeted coast to coast, *The Nation* revealed that Bertelsmann - the largest book publisher in the U.S. - has carefully hidden its stalwart complicity with the Third Reich.

About the Secret History of Lead In an exhaustive special report, *The Nation* showed how General Motors, Standard Oil and Du Pont colluded to make and market gasoline containing lead - a deadly poison - although there were safe alternatives. Abetted by the US government, they suppressed scientific evidence that lead kills. Still sold in countries all over the world, leaded gasoline continues to poison the planet.

About The Wall Street Journal Contrary to its self-assessment as "the world's most important publication," Gore Vidal noted for *The Nation* "just how unknown this cheery neofascist paper is to the majority of Americans."

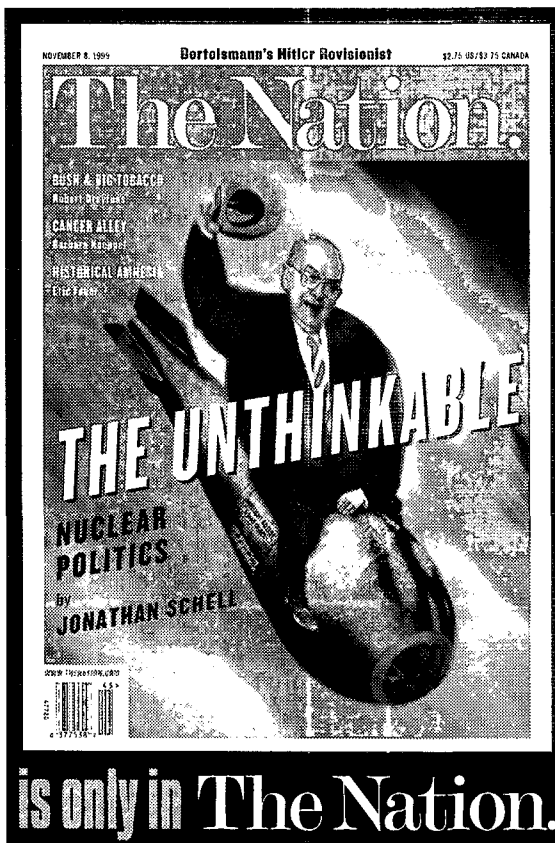
About Arts Funding As columnist Katha Pollitt wrote, "the right-wing attack on the National Endowment for the Arts is playing to a small, if ferocious, constituency. Contrary to stereotype, Americans *like* the arts, and the more access they have to them, the more they like them."

About The Battle in Seattle. "Seattle was indeed a milestone of a new kind of politics. Labor shed its nationalism for a new rhetoric of internationalism and solidarity.

Progressives replaced their apologetic demeanor of the past twenty years with confidence, style and wit."

About The Battle Beyond Seattle. As William Greider put it in his debut as *The Nation's* national affairs correspondent, "Arrogance designed the WTO; arrogance will doubtless defend it. In the meantime, the WTO can serve as a splendid rallying point for popular resistance."

About The F.B.I. An intensive investigation for *The Nation* turned up everything from slovenly casework to massively skewed priorities. Example: Number of convictions for health and safety violations against employees in a single year: one. Number of telephone taps: 1.3 million.



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Which Side Are You On?

By David Moberg

This uninspired presidential race may turn out to be historically significant after all—but not because of the stature of the candidates or the issues they're raising. Underneath the bunting, sound bites and subliminal RATS, there is the start of a big shift in public sentiment against corporate excess and toward a more active government.

After many years of conservative backlash and endless government-bashing, national polls reflect a growing outrage at abuses of power by corporations and the rich, a desire for government to help the vast majority of working people, and a profound concern about economic security and inequality. Coupled with support for a more tolerant and compassionate society and concern about the natural environment, this sea change could open up new opportunities for progressive politics.

Much of this shift is a reaction to the changes in society unleashed by the conservative policies that have dominated the past quarter century. Globalization, job insecurity, a squeeze on family time and income, the arrogance of big corporations and greed of the very rich all have contributed to a new sentiment about the value of government and the power of private business. Most Americans have come quite rightly to believe that globalization favors the rich and powerful. The wave of corporate mergers and reorganizations in the '90s also has taught them that their livelihoods are insecure even at highly profitable companies. The scandal of big-money political fundraising and the price paid for inadequate regulation—from utility price hikes to deadly Firestone tires and Ford trucks—add to public distrust of big business and the wealthy.

But perhaps the most significant factor is growing economic inequality. Although median wages grew in real terms in the late '90s, the highest paid elite pulled even farther away from the vast majority, according to the latest "State of Working America," just released by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI). The picture looks even more stark if income from property and investments is added to wages. Looking at tax data, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that the top 1 percent of income tax filers reported that their average income grew by 41 percent from 1993 to 1997, while the bottom 90 percent gained less than 5 percent. The rich have fared well partly because of stock market gains and partly because of the huge increase in executive salaries (which rose from 42 times the average worker's pay in 1980 to 420 times in 1998, according to a *Business Week* survey of large companies). Underscoring the continuing strength of this change, for the first time in the postwar era, according to EPI, "the division of total corporate income between income paid to workers and income paid to owners of capital shifted strongly in favor of owners during the 1990s."



The main reason that inequality has increased so consistently since the early '70s, Chuck Collins and Felice Yeskel of United for a Fair Economy argue in a new report, *Economic Apartheid in America*, is that corporate power has increased. Corporations used their political influence and economic power to rewrite the rules for both the global and domestic economy to suit their interests, which in turn increased their power even more.

When income inequality began to rise in the early '70s, most families responded to stagnant or falling wages by working harder: first, by women and other family members taking jobs, then by increasing their hours of work. EPI found that the most important explanation of family income growth in the '90s was the number of hours worked—a total increase of about six weeks per year for the average middle-income married couple (with lower-income or black and Latino families all working longer hours).

This squeeze on working families in the late '70s and '80s fed into the backlash against welfare: People were working harder but getting nowhere, so they often turned their frustration against people they saw as collecting paychecks without working. Welfare reform drastically cut the rolls of recipients, reducing public spending in the '90s. But as the nonpartisan Economic Roundtable recently concluded about the Los Angeles welfare-to-work program, former aid recipients have bounced from one low-wage employer to another, with most remaining stuck below poverty. As time limits on benefits run out, and especially when the next economic downturn hits, a crisis is sure to follow. Yet ironically, according to surveys, welfare reform has yielded one benefit for the working poor: more sympathy for raising wages. If people are working, they deserve a decent life, most people say, which is one reason why the janitors' strikes earlier this year struck such a popular chord.

The conservative movement laments its waning momentum but hasn't changed its stripes. It is just trying to put on a more appealing disguise. Even as inequality continues to grow, conservatives keep promoting policies that would give even more wealth and power to the rich and corporations. They have been clever in some cases, attacking an estate tax as a "death tax" aimed at the middle class, when in fact it affects only about 2 percent of all estates (mainly those making more than \$190,000 a year at death). Meanwhile, under the cover of eliminating the "marriage penalty," the Republicans would provide four-fifths of the tax break (costing nearly \$30 billion a year at decade's end) to the top one-fifth of taxpayers and half of the tax cut to families that already receive "marriage bonuses," according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Most Democrats have resisted (and President Clinton vetoed both measures), but not as forcefully as they should. They usually emphasize the inequity of tax cuts skewed heavily to the rich, but they feebly argue that tax cuts would be fiscally irresponsible instead of making the case for using the money to guarantee prescription drug insurance for the elderly or universal health insurance for children.

One indication of a political sea change has been the lukewarm public response to the centerpiece of Bush's campaign—a massive \$1.9 trillion tax cut. Most people probably don't realize that 43 percent of the cut would go to the richest 1 percent of households, who would get an average of \$46,072 a year, while the middle 20 percent would get only 8.4 percent of the tax cut, an average of \$453 a year. However, the average voter probably has an intuitive sense that she won't benefit much from Bush's tax cut.

There's a widespread sense that there are more important things for the government to do with its money—like improve schools, protect Social Security and Medicare, or expand health care coverage. As pollster Stanley Greenberg, now working for Gore, argued in his book *Middle Class Dreams*, middle-class Americans (including most of what others would call the working class) want government to help give them a chance to prosper. With growing insecurity and inequality, and the frustration that more hard work has yielded so little, more working families don't want to eliminate government. They want to see government on their side. But there's a caveat for progressives: People want government as an ally, not as Big Brother.

Bush's "compassionate conservatism" is a political recognition that the majority of citizens reject both the hard-edged intolerance of the Christian right and the abandonment of the less fortunate. Even he had to embrace the idea that government needs to do more to help people with education, for example. But the fundamental thrust of his message remains much the same: Turn over more control to big corporations and the market, but describe it as providing more "choice." Bush's program offers a false choice in nearly every case, including school vouchers.

Progressives, however, should not dismiss the deeply popular idea of increasing choices. But they need to make it clearer to people why the choices they offer are more meaningful. For example, it seems likely more people would rather choose between doctors than choose which HMO will exploit and abuse them.

Gore's vision of how to help is also woefully inadequate. Although the Democrats need to show the public that they can be fiscally responsible, Gore's zeal to reduce the national debt is thoroughly misguided. Many of the targeted interventions in his vast grab bag of targeted tax cuts could be more fairly, comprehensively and effectively delivered through direct spending programs, without cluttering the tax code. His response to growing inequality, which he understandably is loathe to acknowledge, is feeble. It consists largely of offering middle-class tax cuts, a higher minimum wage and expanded earned income tax credits for the lowest paid workers.

Otherwise, his strategy is to increase productivity, mainly by reducing the debt (hoping that will lower interest rates), further deregulating the economy, and opening foreign markets—with a brief aside about investing in people and technology. Continued productivity growth is a laudable goal, but workers presently are not getting their share of productivity growth, and Gore's plan will do little to enhance productivity and almost nothing to redistribute its fruits. The income problem for workers is not taxes but corporate power. While Gore briefly has endorsed ideas to make it easier to organize unions and some modest measures to make women's pay more equal to men's, he does not link unionization to his strategy to raise family incomes.

Ralph Nader obviously offers a much more robust program of attacking "corporate crime," strengthening unions, rewriting the rules of globalization, reviving citizen politics, getting big money out of politics and eliminating corporate subsidies (a topic that Gore would never raise). He lampoons Bush as "a giant corporation running for president disguised as a person," and challenges Gore to give back the corporate soft money donations to the Democrats if he truly intends to stand up to powerful interests. Nader's candidacy reflects a

cutting edge of the renewed anti-corporate spirit and undoubtedly has forced Gore to adopt a more populist tone.

But even Gore's mild anti-corporate comments generated an immediate charge from Bush that the vice president was fomenting "class warfare." National Association of Manufacturers President Jerry Jasinowski complained that Gore had forgotten that business was responsible for the recent prosperity. Indeed, a significant faction of Democratic officials (like Joe Lieberman, whom Jasinowski glowingly quoted) are ideologically closer to Jasinowski than to Nader. Yet it is also true, progressives must remember, that

most Americans are ambivalent about big business, resenting its power and irresponsibility but dependent on it for jobs and products.

However, overall sentiment is turning against corporate power. A *Business Week* poll revealed that 74 percent of Americans say that "business has gained too much power over too many aspects of American life." While the survey showed that people think some companies (like computer makers) serve their customers well, 63 percent think that company treatment of their employees is "only fair" or "poor." Around three-fourths of those surveyed thought big business had too much political influence.

There's the rub. Political influence, exerted both through campaign contributions and economic blackmail, is certain to curb Gore's new populist fervor if he wins—and it now looks like his wooing of working families may do the trick for him. But the renewed distrust of corporations will not vanish and could break out more dramatically in the next economic downturn. Even as conservative Democrats cheer the death of the left and curry favor with business, the reality of class reasserts itself in American politics.

Gore and the Democrats will be forced to answer the old question: Which side are you on? ■

Changing public opinion about the power of corporations and role of government presents an opportunity for progressives.

Enough is enough. The more pieces I read like Robert W. McChesney's brief for voting for Ralph Nader, the more I despair for any real self-reflection among progressives ("Why I'm Voting for Ralph," August 21). I don't fault Nader. He plays an essential role in American politics. But both the candidate and his strategy should be scrutinized, not converted into a gauzy image of a beacon of hope. The essential flaw of progressive politics in this country has always been that when we haven't done our homework, we look for someone to take the exam for us. We're doing it again.

Power over Prophets

By Carl Pope

I am a Lincoln Steffens progressive. I believe that the essential task of progressives in America is not to elect extraordinary people, but to find extraordinary ways to hold the average politician accountable to ordinary citizens. Steffens' main theme was that "good government," by which the progressives of his era meant government by better politicians (usually by politicians from a better class), failed time and again. Instead, Steffens advocated "representative government," government that had to answer to the public, regardless of who held office.

The difference, according to Steffens, lay in politics. Walter L. Fischer of Chicago's Municipal Voters League told Steffens how the League could take Chicago wards that had voted Republican in one election and turn them out for a Democrat in the next, and then turn back to the Republicans. Fischer, and the other leaders of the League, were politicians. Steffens describes in his autobiography how "in Fisher's office I saw him, a reform boss, perform exactly like a regular political boss, browbeat and control a various lot of (honest and dishonest) politicians, and then send them out, watched and controlled, to represent what they all knew was in the best interest of the whole people of Chicago. ... It was a long, slow, hard task; it lasted years, ten or twelve, and when I wrote it, I described this as an example of a reform that was working."

Ralph Nader's entire career is about anti-politics. I have worked on issues alongside Nader for close to 30 years. He is a superb, fabulous maverick. He is as independent as they come—and part of his independence is his unwillingness to be held accountable to an organization or party. He is a moralist, and moralists do not build political parties, or even democratic institutions. They stand outside them, and speak truth to their inevitable flaws.

Compare what we observe of Nader with what Steffens tells us of how Bob LaFollette took over the Republican Party in Wisconsin. LaFollette's "method, in brief, was to go around to towns and crossroads, make long, carefully stated speeches of fact, and appealing to idealism of patriotism, watch the audience for faces, mostly young faces which he thought showed inspiration."

So far, so good. Nader is certainly doing the 21st century equivalent. But then LaFollette did precisely what Nader has always declined to do, and still declines to do—he used this idealism to build an institution, to take control of a major party. "These he invited to come to him afterward; he showed them what the job was, asked them if they would do their part in their district; and so he built up an organized following to him so responsive that it was called a machine. As it was—a powerful political machine which came to control the Republican Party in Wisconsin."

But while LaFollette built the machine, he was also accountable to it. Everyone who has worked with Nader knows that he is not a man with the slightest inclination to build a democratic institution. Every organization he has built is run from the top. He is, simply, not an organization man. Prophets rarely are.

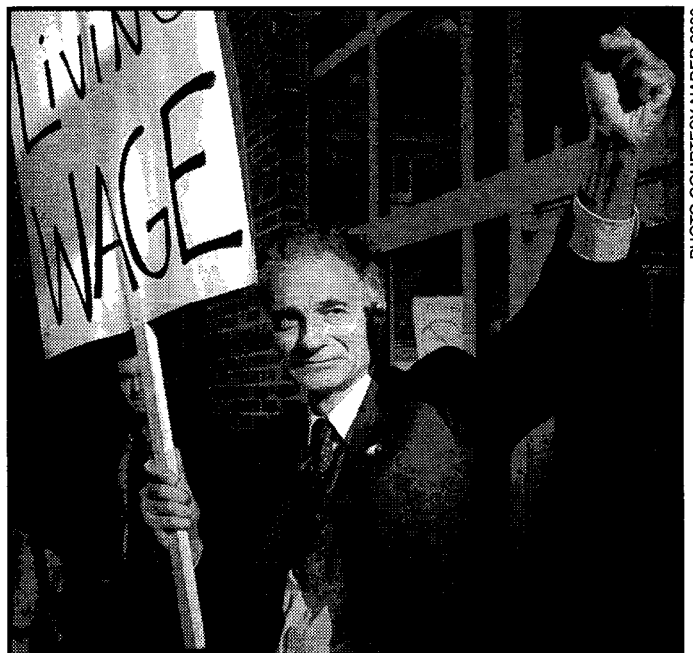


PHOTO COURTESY NADER 2000

Why else would Nader, while campaigning as a Green Party candidate, and claiming that the major fallout of his efforts will be to strengthen that party, refuse to join it? Why doesn't he see the conflict between his claim that he is building the Green Party as an institution and his simultaneous claim that his candidacy will invigorate the electoral chances of congressional Democrats? One or the other of these two statements may be true, but they cannot coexist—except that to Nader the Green Party is his candidacy, not the institution that supports that candidacy. Nor is Nader in search of a party to represent. If we had a major party that reflected his values, I suspect he would not offer to serve it by running for president. He has, in fact, no serious desire to be president.

Nader is running as a Green Party candidate in the same fashion that he has campaigned tirelessly for auto safety or against undemocratic trade accords—as a maverick. He is seeking leverage on the political process. He admits this. He tells audiences that if he succeeds in getting enough votes to defeat Al Gore, the Democrats will “pay more attention” to their progressive wing. They will no longer be taken for granted. The Democrats’ “cold shower” will be good for them—and that is good enough for Nader. This raises the question of whether it will be good for us.

By campaigning for leverage, Nader is settling for too little. We need not just leverage. We need power.

Politics is a full-time process. The quadrennial general elections are harvest time. But if we haven't planted, weeded and irrigated, we won't garner much when we go out to reap.

Leverage is the ability to influence the path a polity takes to an objective. Power is the capacity to decide the objective. Obtaining power will require a long struggle, just as it took the Municipal Voters League in Chicago. It will require ideas. It will also require politics. It will require both leaders and an organized constituency to which those leaders are held accountable. And, given the enormous institutional, cultural and financial opposition we will face, we will need to be intelligent, strategic and disciplined.

The reaction of too many progressives to the Nader candidacy lacks all three of these qualities. McChesney and others argue that if we support Gore, then four years from now we will be faced with the same or, in their views, an even more dismal choice. However, our opponents, in the event that Gore is elected, will not take a four-year hiatus and reconsider their options in the summer of 2004. In fact, even if they elect George Bush, they will go to work immediately rebuilding their popular base, strengthening their hold on the Republican Party, further infiltrating the Democrats, finding even more ways to use money as a substitute for popular will in the democratic process, and completing their takeover of popular culture. Politics is a full-time process. The quadrennial general elections are harvest time. But if we haven't planted, weeded and irrigated, we will not garner much when we go out to reap.

The obvious question is: Why didn't Nader run as a Democrat? (He did once, of course, and did very badly. But he did equally badly the first time he ran as a Green four years ago.) McChesney argues that this route is not plausible, because of “the necessity for obscenely massive campaign war chests; the tight noose of the corporate news media with their pathetic range of legitimate debate; and the requirement of progressives to show their party loyalty.”

These are indeed substantial obstacles. But they apply, with equal or greater validity, to the Green Party. It too is disadvantaged by lack of money, by a monopoly media, by old party loyalties. Indeed, it is not clear that either Nader or McChesney envisage that the Greens will ever be able to win the presidency, precisely because the obstacles the Greens face are even greater than those that prevent a progressive from winning the Democratic nomination.

Nader talks vociferously of how big money has bought up the two major parties. But it is candidates who control parties, not the other way around. Imagine if Nader had spent four years building a base among Democrats, showing up at Jackson Day dinners, campaigning for aldermen and suburban state legislators, raising money in small-donor fundraisers for the state party in Iowa and New Hampshire. (That you probably can't imagine Nader doing these things is precisely my point.) Then Gore and Bradley would have gone into their primary battle facing a third candidate, with a real organization inside the party—one who articulated a very different vision, for example, of how international agreements might be used to make multinational corporations democratically accountable.

No, Nader (or more plausibly a Paul Wellstone) would probably not have won the nomination. But neither is Nader going to be elected president by running as a Green. And if he, and we, had spent the past four years on an effort inside the Democratic Party, we would be much closer today to a meaningful instrument honed to stand up to the power of big money. (This is true whether Nader manages to elect George Bush or not. His Green Party candidacy does nothing to strengthen progressive forces within the party.)

McChesney argues that “the only way to jolt life into this system is from the outside.” I challenge him to cite a single piece of historical evidence to support this claim. The Christian right made its mark on the Republican Party from the inside. The CIO in the '30s, the civil rights movement in the '60s, McGovern in the '70s did the same with the Democrats. The Populists squandered their opportunity to shape public policy for 20 years until they came back inside the Democratic Party. In that interval corporations became people in the eyes of the courts. The third party route in our history has typically been been a way station on the road to irrelevancy—the Progressives and the Dixiecrats in 1948, John Anderson and Barry Commoner in 1980, Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996.

Indeed, it is hard to tell, but I almost suspect that the reason so many are entranced by the third party path and the Nader candidacy is that they don't want to spend four years doing all that mucky politics inside the system. My own organization, the Sierra Club, has found much less enthusiasm among our volunteers for the year-in, year-out tedium of precinct organizing and caucus-going than for periodic crusades. There is a long “white gloves” tradition among American progressives. An old testament prophet like Nader has strong appeal to that tradition.

That doesn't make his candidacy either strategic or wise. ■

Carl Pope is the executive director of the Sierra Club.

Few issues have aroused such passion and debate on the American political left as how to approach this year's Nader-LaDuke Green Party campaign for the White House. For those who support the progressive policies of Nader and LaDuke, the questions are tactical: Will a vote for Nader help to elect Bush, a truly horrendous and reactionary fool? Is the Nader campaign a necessary step in breaking out of the downward cycle of "lesser-of-two-evils" politics? Is the ultimate route to advancing left electoral politics to

Ralph's Real Threat

By Robert W. McChesney

come through the Democrats or through a third party like the Greens? Whatever one thinks of Nader's campaign, a discussion of these sorts of long-term strategic issues has been long overdue, which explains the passion and intelligence of much of this debate.

I have made my own case for why I believe it important for those on the left to support Nader. Some people like *In These Times* founder James Weinstein and editor Joel Bleifuss disagree. Although they have raised some strong points, on balance, I think they are wrong. But with the publication of Carl Pope's piece, the debate in this magazine has careened off the tracks.

Since this is a strategic and tactical debate over whether or not to pull the lever for Nader, we need to stop thinking of this in the abstract as some national, whoever-gets-the-most-votes-wins election. The presidential election is not determined by whoever gets the most votes. Due to the electoral college system, it is settled on a state-by-state basis.

As of this writing, the outcome in around half the states effectively has been decided. If someone lives in states like Texas, Indiana or Arizona, they can vote for Nader with complete and total peace of mind because Gore doesn't have a prayer. Likewise, there are several places—Massachusetts and the District of Columbia are obvious ones—where Gore has a commanding lead. If everyone sympathetic to Nader voted for him, Gore would still carry these states with ease.

And Gore has recently built up solid leads of 5 to 10 points in many states across the Northeast and Midwest. If Bush's campaign continues to flounder—and his incompetence, corruption and stupidity become more apparent—only the most cautious souls in the few states where the race is close need consider a vote for Gore. But even if the outcome remains in doubt to the

end, some 40 states still should be clearly in the Bush or Gore column beforehand.

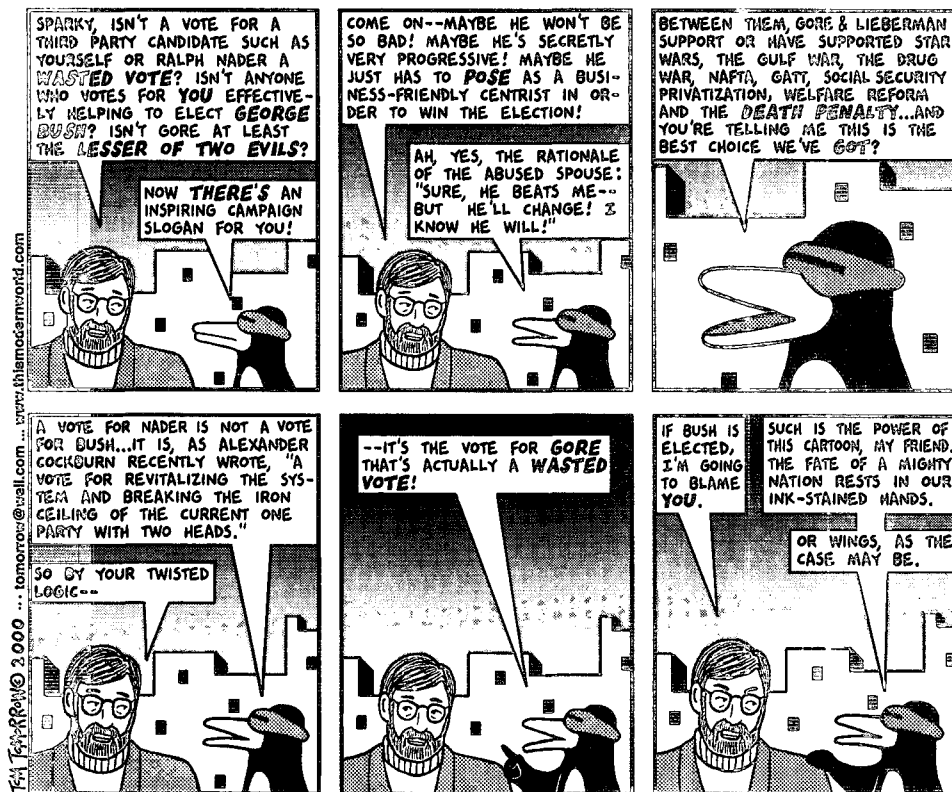
In this light, assuming votes for Nader do not cost Gore the election, it is in the interest of all progressives, all who believe Nader is right on the issues, for his campaign to do well this year. If Nader can get 5 percent of the vote, it will guarantee some \$12 million in matching funds to the Greens in 2004. In view of the media blackout of the Nader campaign and its lack of money, getting 5 percent of the vote would be a huge victory and would invigorate organizing in the coming years.

Now some sympathetic to left politics but committed to working within the Democratic Party might find this counterproductive. They might fear that an established Green Party would undermine our ability to push the Democrats to the left. I think that is wrong. If Nader does get less than 5 percent of the vote, it will spell disaster for progressive electoral politics. If Nader gets smashed down to 1 or 2 percent of the vote, it will send a clear message that there is no viable constituency for left politics in this country. It will demoralize all progressives immeasurably. But if Nader does well, it will assure those working within the Democratic Party that there is a base of voter support for their policies.

Let me reiterate this crucial point: The progressive wing of the Democratic Party has been crushed by the pro-corporate Democratic Leadership Council over the past two decades. It only looks to get worse. It used to be that "moderate" Democrats like LBJ and Jimmy Carter picked liberals like Hubert Humphrey and Walter Mondale to balance the ticket. With the moderate Gore's selection of the militaristic, business-loving Lieberman, he raised a middle finger to the left in the party and the nation. And now we are supposed to believe that Nader getting 1 percent of the vote instead of 5 percent or more will increase progressive leverage within the party? I don't think so.

If Nader succeeds this fall, his greatest contribution may be establishing a place for progressive politics in our political culture. Millions of people oblivious to left ideas might be exposed to them.

There is another reason why Nader doing well is crucial to the development of left electoral politics. It is arguable that the electorate, even with our pathetic news media, is well to the left of the established political parties. Survey after survey finds considerable popular support for progressive issues like single-payer health insurance and campaign finance reform. Both Bush and Gore made their largest gains in the polls when they pitched their campaigns to the left of their standard comfort zones. In each case this was the result of extensive focus-group research on likely voters by the campaigns, not a sincere shift in thought by the candidates. Moreover, the majority of adults are now non-voters, and as they are disproportionately young, minorities and working-class, they fit the profile of those more inclined to vote left. Were it not for the electoral system and the role of big money, U.S. politics would be well to the left of where it is today.



One of the core problems the left faces is that many Americans consider politics irrelevant and see little difference between the parties. In the official culture, Clinton and Gore are the left-wing, which means most Americans don't even have a sense of what progressive politics actually look like. If Nader succeeds this fall, his greatest contribution may be establishing a place for progressive politics in our political culture. Millions of people oblivious to left ideas might be exposed to them. I can hardly exaggerate how important this will be to the left's long-term prospects. Likewise, if Nader flops this fall, our job will be doubly difficult.

This is Nader's real threat to the status quo. The corporate establishment knows he is not going to win the election, but they are scared to death of the politics he represents. They want the world to see Gore-Lieberman as the left edge of permissible thought. Accordingly, *The New Republic*, *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, to name a few, have engaged in a character assassination of Nader and his campaign worthy of *Pravda*'s treatment of Andrei Sakharov. The *Times*, for example, has probably given Nader a minute fraction of the coverage it has provided Bush or Gore, but it has printed no less than four editorials and columns in the past 10 weeks attacking Nader that were filled with half-truths, innuendo and flat-out lies.

Likewise, the Gore campaign has sent out its liberals to lead the charge against Nader, arguing to those on the left that a vote for Nader would lead to the ruination of the republic. Principled Democrats like

Paul Wellstone, Russ Feingold and Jesse Jackson Jr., who are more interested in advancing progressive politics than winning brownie points from the DLC, will have nothing to do with this charade. But others, like Barney Frank, are trotting around the nation bashing Nader in the most unscrupulous manner imaginable.

Enter Carl Pope. There are no concerns here with how best to advance progressive politics. There is no discussion of tactical voting in states where a vote for Nader will not hurt Gore. There is no recognition whatsoever of the problems with Gore and the corporate domination of the Democratic Party. That's because Pope isn't on the left; he isn't a progressive in the contemporary usage of the term. He has supported the mainstream of the Democratic Party over his long career. His career has been filled with attempts to reduce the influence of the left in the Sierra

Club and the environmental movement, to keep it respectable for corporate America. And it appears he wants to do the same thing to the Democratic Party.

To employ Dick Cheney's vernacular, Pope supports Gore "big time." For Pope to argue the truth, that he supports Gore's politics and has been Gore's main advocate in the environmental movement for more than a decade, would be counterproductive. His assignment is to go around and thwart the rebellion against Gore by any means necessary. So Pope submits this disingenuous and sloppy piece of propaganda to *In These Times* to serve the Gore campaign. (How sloppy? As key evidence, Pope tells us the great Bob LaFollette didn't believe in third parties. In fact, LaFollette, out of disgust with the status quo, established the Progressive Party and got 17 percent of the 1924 presidential vote on that ticket.)

Pope fraudulently masquerades as someone who supports Nader on the issues but has been reduced to endorsing Gore this time because of the technical nature of the two-party system. In the process, he presents a mean-spirited and vicious diatribe against Nader, his supporters and his campaign, all with the aim of discrediting them. This is not meant to contribute to a comradely debate among progressives, and it doesn't.

I am not trying to convince the Carl Popes of the world to vote for Nader. They should vote for Gore. My concern is with those who actually support Nader's policies, who are on the left, who want to advance progressive politics, and who are understandably concerned about the prospect of a Bush-Cheney administration. That is the important debate that belongs in *In These Times*. ■

Take a Flying Leap

By Bill Boisvert

Pushing 40, passed over for a promotion and tired of the rat race, *Boston Globe* journalist Tom Ashbrook was at a crossroads. News had become decadent. "It got ugly. Petty. Tawdry. Marginal. Vaudeville. ... O.J. Whitewater. Paula Jones."

The Leap: A Memoir of Love and Madness in the Internet Goldrush
By Tom Ashbrook
Houghton Mifflin
295 pages, \$25

His seemingly glamorous career as a foreign correspondent had begun to pall. "Walking through the gutted streets of Mogadishu and Vukovar," he suddenly noticed how passé it all seemed. "It looked older than news should be," he recalls of the war-torn vistas of Africa and the Balkans, "too old for me ... a creaking pointless trick of history too bloody, too endless."

But the problem wasn't media distortions of the world, the problem was the world itself—specifically, all that tangible substance that is, economically speaking, pure dead weight. "Brick-and-mortar was a burden, a ball and chain," he writes of the "heavy, solid, depreciating" physical world. "It was the old economy. It was history. And its past performance was no guarantee of future returns."

From now on returns would only come from a "world that was electronic, light, untouchable," far removed from the "factories and warehouses and stores" he wished would just melt into air. Surely, he thought, as he pondered a tired world of massacres and blow jobs and rusting infrastructure, "there had to be a way to keep life fresh and free," a way to "go forward, to find the world's new energy." Fortunately, there was a way: "They called it the Internet. ... It was young and fresh and knew nothing of genocide and war."

So, Ashbrook cofounded a dotcom—HomePortfolio, an online home furnishings catalogue. *The Leap* is his account of HomePortfolio's beginnings, from starry-eyed inception to triumphant

first-round financing, with investors lining up for a piece of the action. Part advertorial and part manifesto, *The Leap* is a fascinating window into the mythology of the New Economy. Its most potent metaphor is the Web site itself, a haven of "unique home design products" that helps consumers "express their personal tastes and aspiration" and conjures up "the home of people's dreams." HomePortfolio both expresses the cyber-critique of reality—that it's a squalid, enervating mess we'd be well advised to bypass via the Internet—and transcends it by promising to replace the "dark, cloistered and usually modest home of reality" with an "open, gracious, sun-filled version of that traditional home."

tastes, imagineered out of the cornucopia of options thrown up by the market.

Then there's Ashbrook himself, the proverbial content-provider, who trades in his depreciating intellectual capital for skyrocketing equity capital. Neither an autistic tech-head nor an MBA'd player, he is a typical bourgeois bohemian, complete with liberal politics, a Woodward-and-Bernstein anti-establishment streak and an ostentatious diffidence toward wealth. For him, entrepreneurship is a voyage of self-discovery: "I didn't think it was about money at all," he writes of his blossoming get-rich-quick scheme, but about "risk-taking" and "passion" and "feeling really, really alive."

Ashbrook's story is a reassuring one, in which the bohemian ideals of emotion, spontaneity and direct experience are assimilated to the dominant



Through its user-friendly interface, bricks and mortar, once the constituent materials of factories, are stripped of their association with assembly-line toil and become the stuff of "dream homes," fantasy settings for upscale domesticity and leisure. The pointless, bloody past is harmlessly resurrected as pretty Victorianish décor, and identity is disentangled from collective experience and becomes a unique expression of personal

ethos of capitalist acquisitiveness. Nonetheless, his glib assertion that profitability equals authenticity papers over more troubling questions that are raised but not confronted in *The Leap*. Can dream homes exist without industrial drudgery? Will all the social ills of capitalism evaporate along with the physical plant? Does the Internet promote a deeper engagement with the world, or a more hermetic form of escapism? Is

investor confidence the ultimate measure of one's humanity?

And is it really not about the money at all? Ashbrook hymns HomePortfolio as a liberation movement that will usher in the democratization of art and design and "change the way people lived, the way they slept and cooked and saw the sun and loved and breathed and the rooms they danced in." But it becomes clear early on that Ashbrook has no particular interest in houses, per se. "Great homes are inspiring," Ashbrook allows half-heartedly, "but the main thing is ... to move information in a way that makes a difference."

Why is he so inspired by information flow, that insipid managerial abstraction? Because information flows triggers cash flow, to the tune of "\$80 million—by year three." Projections like that make him giddy: "I hopped up on a big rock, pissing a long arc into the woods, laughing and crowing like a goofy rooster."

What really seems to motivate Ashbrook is the status anxiety of professionals who find themselves near—but not at—the top of the heap. Pre-leap, Ashbrook, his wife and their three kids are one of those destitute upper-middle-class families you read about, unable to make ends meet on \$150,000 a year. Trapped in the limbo between affluence and wealth, he starts to question the hamster wheel of salaried employment. He muses on the fact that, while the top 5 percent of the population earns just 18 percent of the nation's income, the top 2 percent owns 80 percent of the wealth. His own labor had gotten him into the top 5 percent, but only equity would get him into the top 2 percent. He recalls the words of an old gold prospector he used to know: "You'll never be free working for a wage."

As *The Leap* progresses, this theme evolves into an elaborate counterpoint between debased labor and exalted capital. Labor is stultifying and moribund. Capital is creative and life-affirming. Labor is embodied in the "lifeless eyes" of the "zombies" Ashbrook used to work with at the *Globe*. Capital is embodied in the "glittering eyes" of the "young firebrands" in the entrepreneurial management class he sits in on at Harvard Business School. The key

element distinguishing labor from capital is risk.

The point is hammered into Ashbrook at Harvard, where academic celebrities regale him with pop-nihilist clichés about the death of the middle class and the need to "put all concrete elements of the past at risk" and "eviscerate traditional customs." Under their influence he begins to rail against his fellow risk-averse Boomers, still absorbed with "their angst and their aging parents and puking kids and their complicated emotional lives," still dependent on their "automatic deposits, pension plans and 401K statements" and all the other "vanishing 9-to-5 certainties" he had learned to do without. "Can they ever be free enough," he wonders, "to give a startup the push it's going to need to make it?"

What a contrast to the superwealthy venture capitalists who staked HomePortfolio, all of them titans who gobble life by the fistful. If one is "electric," then the next is "smart and intuitive, irreverent and funny," while a third is "an empath, with huge sparkling green eyes" that see "right to the souls" of the supplicants pitching him for financing. One Wall Street honcho is nothing less than a human hurricane as he rains a "shower of instructions, ideas, simultaneous interlocking phone conversations" that keep "a whole platoon of lieutenants racing in his wake to wrap up the deals he spun off in waves."

Ironically, given Ashbrook's oft-expressed view of entrepreneurship as a deliverance from the curse of labor, his own life as an entrepreneur is governed by the most degrading of all capitalist work processes: the cold call. He phones friends, relatives, venture capitalists, next-door neighbors, total strangers, even NBC anchorman Stone Phillips, trying to drum up funds to keep HomePortfolio afloat. Capitalism is about capital, nowhere more so than at an online startup. Ashbrook had imagined the Internet to be "a realm where value created in the mind could be turned directly, digitally, into real economic value." But he discovers that grassroots e-commerce requires a huge overhead of computers, programmers, graphic designers and photographers; soon HomePortfolio's "burn rate" hits \$75,000 a month, with no sales and no

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product to sell. Desperate for cash, Ashbrook and his partner shoulder hundreds of thousands of dollars in credit card debt as their wives protest at the ruin of their family finances.

Ashbrook's book is worth reading for its harrowing depiction of the insatiable hunger for capital, the endless credit crises and the humiliating necessity to sell oneself and one's carefully nurtured equity stake to any and every moneyman. But while others might view this saga as a dehumanizing tragedy, Ashbrook turns it into a swelling Nietzschean rhapsody. The cold call is the furnace in which his soul is forged anew: "My palms were sweating. I felt flushed. ... If I couldn't dial that number, then I wasn't cut out for this entrepreneurial thing. ... I was just another good schmo on the assembly line, waiting for his plant to close."

Finally, he dials. He meets rejection after rejection, but he finds that it only makes him stronger. "Only my flesh is vulnerable, and I am not flesh. I am one with the vision. I will walk on water, I will pull the sun up with my bare hands. I will make new worlds."

As he reassesses every human tie in terms of its cold cash value to his business, Ashbrook learns that entrepreneurship is the bedrock of human solidarity. The insecurity and atomization bred by the marketplace turn out to be the wellspring of deeper, stronger communities based on risk. He feels a mystic connection with his distant forebears who braved the leap across the Atlantic, and with the little band of risk-takers in the HomePortfolio office. "What a time we lived in," Ashbrook exults, "when talented people like this were free agents."

Like other New Economy propagandists, Ashbrook uses the rhetoric of self-actualization to disparage older conceptions of human fulfillment—that labor should be dignified and remunerative, that security is the essence of freedom, not its antithesis. It's not an entirely successful strategy. Much as he touts an economy based on authenticity, deep down Ashbrook thinks the world has too much authenticity—too much history, too much corporeality, too many social encumbrances that inhibit the exercise of free agency.

The contradictions become glaring when we think about where the

money that financed his business came from in the first place. Did venture capitalists pull it out of the sun with their bare hands? No, it came from automatic deposits, pension plans, 401Ks and all those other bourgeois crutches Ashbrook imagines he can do without. It came from the college savings Boomers are stashing away for their puking kids. It came

**Like other
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and security of labor.**

from profits off the labor of all those good schmosen on the assembly line, waiting for their plants to close down. Ashbrook would like to wish away these inconvenient realities.

To get a look at Ashbrook's preferred form of authenticity, I logged on to The Ultimate Purpose of Creation—I mean, HomePortfolio. It may not change the way you love and breathe, but it's not a bad site if you're looking for stuff to put in your house. You can click through to a manufacturer's page, place online impulse orders, or find out where the nearest showroom carrying an item is located (1,001 miles away in the case of a door that caught my eye). You also get rank upon rank of thumbnail photos, sorted by product type, style and price, including 294 chests of drawers, 160 shades of green paint, 1,138 varieties of doorknob, and 123 different toilets (at a median price of \$700). And if browsing HomePortfolio is a little like trying to take a sip of water from a fire hydrant, that's an unavoidable part of the consumerism of self-expression that HomePortfolio upholds. You need a virtual infinity of options to ensure that you'll find the one unique object that embodies your personal tastes and aspirations.

But the basic premise behind this idea—that the consumer has a unique vision, a pre-existing configuration of desire that HomePortfolio simply renders palpable and purchasable—seems deeply flawed. "People are getting better and better at deciding what they like," according to HomePortfolio's credo of populist connoisseurship, but the Web site itself suggests they have no idea what they like. One sees this in the site's Q&A section, where HomePortfolio editors deal with the inchoate pleas of homeowners trying to fill up the echoing interiors of their McMansions. "I'm having a hard time knowing what colors and styles go together," frets one woman grappling, visionless, with a kitchen renovation. "Help!"

To stimulate and shape consumer desires, the Web site offers a "getting inspired" section with lush photo spreads of designer homes. When I logged on, they were showcasing a renovated 19th-century Texas farmhouse. The owners had decided to "visually link" their new addition with their house's imagined past using "rugged touches" like rough-hewn beams, poured concrete countertops and a chicken-feed trough placed insultingly on the dining room table as a centerpiece. That no actual Victorian would have decorated her house with barnyard motifs seemed beside the point.

HomePortfolio isn't really about fulfilling desires, it's about manufacturing fantasies. "Dreaming about homes is the true American pastime," says HomePortfolio's business plan. But it also notes that most of us can't afford luxury houses and must "pursue our dreams vicariously." While HomePortfolio can enhance "the process of dreaming effectively about a new home or renovation," it acknowledges that, for most of us, the dreams can never actually come true.

Still, it's a lucrative business—so lucrative that Ashbrook can only compare it to that other dynamo of e-commerce: "Dreaming about beautiful homes equals safe sex on the Internet."

The Internet may know nothing of genocide and war, but it knows a lot about pornography, which is all that HomePortfolio adds up to in the end—just another solipsistic, masturbatory reverie to console us for our cubicked lives. ■

The Specter Between the Lines

By Paul Maliszewski

When the November 1916 issue of *The New Republic* hit newsstands, it heralded the birth of an entirely new tradition of poetry, the "spectric school." This bold, unequivocal, even triumphant announce-

The Spectra Hoax

By William Jay Smith
Story Line Press
174 pages, \$13.95

ment stood out in the magazine's first books issue, a collection of reviews and essays solemn in tone and grudging with praise, interspersed with large dollops of bet-hedging.

In the lead essay ("A Note on Criticism") the editors jousted with imponderables such as, "What rules have we for literature today?" They wondered, at length, whether standards were needed to improve criticism, or vice versa. They dilated on "temperament," "experience" and "the cultivated imagination." In one moment of uncharacteristic practicality, they warned against "the prevalence of bad taste, the success of charlatans, the vogue for jimcrackery."

Just a few pages later came the extraordinary news of modern poetry's brightest hope, with none of the throat-clearing: "There is a new school of poets," the review began, "a new term to reckon with, a new theory to comprehend, a new manner to notice, a new humor to enjoy." The review, written by the poet Witter Bynner, put the nonsensical, exclamation point-riddled experiments of Emanuel Morgan and Anne Knish, the "cornerstone" and "keystone" of spectra, into the context of the go-go literary modernism and the artistic avant-garde of the day. Morgan, it seems, was an American expatriate and long-time painter, who perfected his creative chops in Paris; Knish was born in Hungary, educated in Germany and lived all over Europe; both recently settled in Pittsburgh, where they prolifically turned out hundreds of spectric poems, all titled like classical music compositions (Opus 76, Opus 29 and so forth); both collected

their best work in *Spectra*, a volume published that year.

Charged with reviewing their work, Bynner compared spectra to the other schools, all the other freshly minted isms—namely imagism, vorticism and chorism (a misguided mixture of chant-poetry and slow dancing championed by Ezra Pound)—and found each wanting next to the newest state of the art. Imagist poems, Bynner argued, "give the ... localized nervous sensations of a sick-bed, as though all the faculties were paralyzed except a finger-tip or one eye or one ear." A spectric poem on the other hand "goes deeper" and "cuts under mere technique."

serious bones to pick with the new poetry, in particular the sense that literary experimentation was rampant and unchecked and presently trampling all over poetry as they knew and loved it. Looking upon so much barbaric free verse loose across the land, they felt it incumbent to guard the gates. So, in Bynner's words, the two decided to have "fun with the extremists and with those of the critics who were overanxious to be in the van."

Fueled by antipathy for imagism and prodigious reserves of scotch, Bynner (writing as Morgan) and Ficke (as Anne Knish) sequestered themselves in Davenport, Iowa and Moline, Illinois, and in less than two weeks completed



What readers of *The New Republic* didn't know—what, for that matter, editors of the magazine, namely Herbert Croly and Philip Littell, didn't know—was that spectra wasn't so much a new mode of poetry as a hoax satirizing all the new modes. Nor was Bynner the "disinterested and impartial" reviewer called for in the issue's saber-rattling lead essay. Bynner was in fact Emanuel Morgan.

Spectra, a collection of inspired doggerel cum artistic manifesto for the nascent poetic movement, grew out of the shared complaints of Bynner and his friend Arthur Davison Ficke. Both had several

their manuscript. Still writing under their spectric pseudonyms, the poets sent a copy to the publisher Mitchell Kennerley, who had brought out books by both Bynner and Ficke. Kennerley accepted the manuscript and didn't flinch when the two briefly lifted their masks and revealed their true identities.

The hoax could easily have ended there, with the poets celebrating the publication of their book and the founding of their bogus school of expression. The potential audience for their hoax would have remained small, but the association with Kennerley would at

least have guaranteed that the parodic poems found their way into small literary magazines. Yet through a chain of coincidences too tangled to explain here, Croly and Littell happened one day to see the page proofs for *Spectra* on Bynner's desk. Instead of recognizing the book as a fake, as Bynner thought for sure they would, the editors saw what they wanted to see: evidence of a new, vigorous poetry. So much the better that nothing had yet been published about this brand new thing: *The New Republic* would be the first and most influential magazine to hop aboard the trend. Bynner, the editors decided, had to review *Spectra* for them.

The details of Bynner's and Ficke's deft, large-scale forgery, as well as the original collection of the poems by Morgan and Knish, are presented in William Jay Smith's highly engaging *The Spectra Hoax*, first published in 1961 and finally brought back into print, with an updated preface, by Story Line Press this year. Smith is a careful literary detective with a clear sense of what's funny and absurd about the spectric duo. He fingers the poets' feisty targets, the duped writers, and those who slipped through the net. He also describes the hoax's eventual unmasking more than two years later.

In Smith's account, the hoax is decidedly and solely literary; its effects are limited and do not reverberate outside the literary world. It's Smith's estimation that Bynner and Ficke concocted a new, highly preposterous and pretentious school to mock what they saw as preposterous, pretentious and ultimately bankrupt in all the other schools. They lampooned modernism's excesses. The era's unbridled artistic experimentation and criticism's lagging vocabulary and grasp of the new art gave the spectric authors all the license they needed. Yes, their critique was sharp and their irony cutting, but they only cut fellow poets, editors of literary magazines, critics and reviewers.

The question of how so much spectric jimcrackery infiltrated *The New Republic* does not interest Smith. In *The Spectra Hoax*, the magazine's editors are hoodwinked because the times had already primed them to expect and accept strange artistic phenomena.

Smith makes nothing of a painfully glaring irony—that the spectra hoax appeared cheek by jowl with a call to critical arms. Nor, although he quotes from nearly all the spectric poets' contemporary reviews, favorable or not, does Smith pay much attention to the stampede of so many magazines, newspapers and journals to fall into line behind Croly and Littell. And nothing is more remarkable about the hoax than the efficiency with which *The New Republic*, in the words of a momentarily fashionable critic, made it tip. A Republican nominee for mayor of Newark, for example, in what must be one of the strangest recorded evasions of political issues, read aloud from *Spectra* at campaign appearances.

It's too bad Smith doesn't reach for deeper interpretation, because much more is at stake in the spectra hoax than

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two poets' aggrieved sense that free verse got out of control way back when. So while Smith is busy pointing at the Beat poets and, in the new edition, John Ashbery as evidence that we need spectra-like satire more than ever to stop the creep of artistic decadence and formlessness, a more interesting and more relevant tale goes untold: the story of the sometimes deliberate and sometimes unwitting collaboration of the news media in perpetuating hoaxes. Journalists' unending infatuation with being the first to report on the latest fad, newest craze or most avant of avant-garde cultural expressions makes them easy prey to hoaxes that give even a hint of promising entrée to, say, a formerly underexplored strain of youth culture, music or cutting-edge business or technology.

The specter of hoaxes past hangs over journalists today. Reading about Bynner and Ficke's shenanigans can explain why a reporter for *Nightline* believed the cyber-inflected hamming Josh Glenn, then editorial director of the Web site Tripod, did for the camera in 1997. "Ramp it up," Glenn exhorted in ersatz digitalese. "Get the synergies ramping with daily rocket." He was speaking, for all the reporter and her producers knew, in an exotic, rarely recorded language, and she was lucky enough to capture this coded expression for a television audience forever fascinated, supposedly, by whatever passes for rare glimpses at anything.

Similarly, the editors of *Social Text*, victims of another celebrated prank, did not doubt physicist Alan Sokal's intentions in writing about the culturally constructed nature of, say, gravity. If anything, they felt subtly congratulated to learn a scientist shared so many of their hoary postmodern commonplaces.

The New Republic of Croly and Littell, in this respect, is not so far removed from *The New Republic* of Charles Lane and Michael Kelly, who eagerly embraced rogue staff writer Stephen Glass' versions of reality. Glass' now infamous article about the bratty 15-year-old hacker demanding money, a convertible, a rare comic book and a lifetime supply of pornography offered, for life-long journalists and shut-in editors, glimpses into the workings of a high-tech computer firm, a land as foreign and bewildering to Lane and Kelly as the new poetry was to Croly and Littell. Glass' editors had heard rumors, of course, about how computer programmers could name their price, and the conventional wisdom, after all, maintained that the young do possess special powers over computers and electronic devices.

What's finally poetic about the spectra hoax is the elegance with which it illustrates how any new writing, from reporting to reviewing to intellectual journalism, finds the easiest path to publication by seeking the consensus and falling into the deep groove of what's written and held to be true already. ■

Paul Maliszewski writes fiction and satire, in addition to dabbling occasionally in media hoaxes. His writing has appeared in *The Baffler* and *McSweeney's*.

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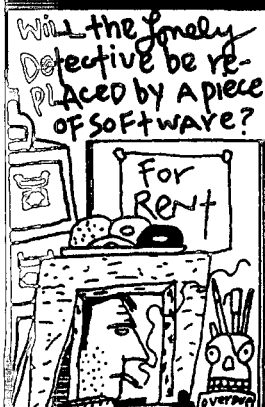


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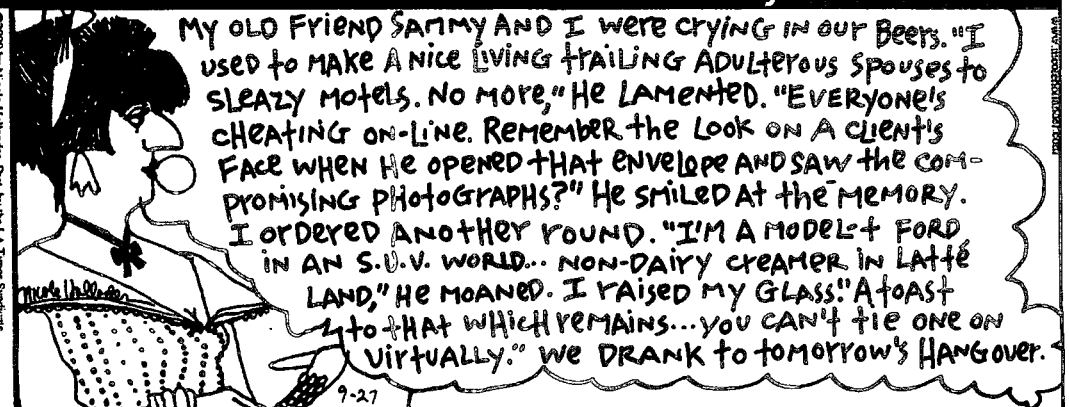
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SYLVIA



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By Nicole Hollander

Continued from page 30

to hit No. 1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and the Christian publisher Tyndale House has moved nearly 23 million Left Behind units (including books and related merchandise). If its ads in *Publishers Weekly* are any indication, Tyndale stands to make a bigger killing with the Mark of the Beast than the Beast himself. Bible-thumping blockbusters, once exiled to the limbo of Christian bookstores, are now girded to battle for shelf space with the secular powerhouse likes of Grisham, Clancy, King and that young tool of Satan, Harry Potter.

Left Behind's success is made more impressive by the way it created its own action/adventure genre out of a part of the Bible assiduously avoided—at least in a noncumenical way—by touchy Hollywood types: the very disturbing Book of Revelation (the Apocalypse of St. John to you Catholics). As raw dramatic material you could do worse. Whether the result of divine inspiration or too much ergot in the Evangelist's bread, Revelation throbs with fantastical visions of vengeful angelic hosts, gouts of blood, a very pissed-off Jehovah, and the ultimate battle between good and evil. (Tip: Don't bet on Satan.)

The Left Behind novels follow their scriptural model more or less accurately and with a contemporary bent, beginning with the Rapture, that time in Christian eschatology when the Lord gathers up the faithful and teleports them to heaven. Why does He do this? Well, let's say the next seven years, known as Tribulation, is the shitstorm of all time. Tribulation is marked by the appearance and rise of Antichrist, whose management agenda reads like Dr. Bronner's soap label, with the establishment of a one-world government and all-one-world-faith religion. Antichrist serves as a sort of global potentate, spiritual leader and deity all in one. This sits ill with God, naturally, who cherishes His own exclusive franchise. Thus, the Four Horsemen blight the earth with war, famine, pestilence, man-headed locusts and other unpleasantness. Throughout, several characters bump into one another until Jesus wins.

One appealing feature of Left Behind is its Howard Zinn-like approach to the Apocalypse, hunkering down in the trenches of Armageddon with four protagonists we can all identify with. The main hero is Capt. Rayford Steele, a pilot who has a dozen passengers raptured during a flight. Shaken, Rayford faces a double-whammy, as he remembers how his drippy born-again wife warned him of the Rapture beforehand. Back home, Rayford sees that wifey and Rayford Jr. have indeed been airlifted, leaving only his tasty agnostic daughter, Chloe.

Meanwhile, virile world-class journalist Cameron "Buck" Williams tries to make sense of it all. Thirty years old, yet pos-

sessed of face time and an expense account that would make the *60 Minutes* staff weep with envy, Buck stumbles into several Revelation highlights, not the least being Antichrist's rapid rise from minor pol in the Romanian parliament to U.N. Pontifex Maximus. Buck eventually meets Rayford and Chloe, and all come under the prophetic tutelage of Pastor Bruce Barnes, a deluded fool shocked to be left behind while his congregation teleported to heaven. Eventually, the four form Tribulation Force, a ballsy, high-powered prayer group driven to thwart Antichrist's plans for world conquest.

Well, kinda. If the meek are supposed to inherit the earth, it just wouldn't do to have Tribulation Force strangling security guards with piano wire.

So what exactly do they do? Well, they pray a lot. Boy howdy, do they pray! Sometimes they read the Bible too, then tell each other how great it is to pray a lot and read the Bible. Then they pray some more. They also play duck-and-cover with Antichrist's Global Community government (the United Nations' new name) and Enigma Babylon One World Faith (the one-world religion—Antichrist doesn't have a knack for catchy names like Unisys). They also slurp up as much prophecy as they can, making up for time lost while evading testimonials and tongues-speaking from now-raptured friends and family.

As for Antichrist, he's a gregarious fellow who resembles *Today*

Show weatherman Al Roker. No, not really. Antichrist is an oleagiously sexy Romanian named Nicolae Carpathia. How do we know he is Antichrist? Well, he dresses in black Armani and is as unctuous as a Junior Achiever on a job interview. He also achieves world power in vaguely described ways, has premarital sex and exterminates underlings when they fail him, à la Dr. No. It's worth mentioning that Antichrist is described as resembling a young version of Hollywood liberal Robert Redford.

You may be asking yourself how, aside from divine intervention, Left Behind has worked its way into the mainstream. Tyndale's marketers ascribe much of the series' success to word of mouth. Joe Evangelist, perhaps feeling left out of water cooler conversations about the tawdry brilliance of Grisham, Clancy and King, now has a page-turner to recommend to his workmates—something more rip-roaring and enticing than the Pauline letters, that is. Soft-pedaling the evangelism without disregarding Christianity's importance to the plot line, and cranking up the cartoonish action, Left Behind attracts readers who may not otherwise read Christian fiction, assuming they could even find it at Wal-Mart or Barnes & Noble.



Honey? ... Scooter? ... Where the hell is everybody?

True, the popularity of *The X-Files* and the fleeting Y2K hubbub—not to mention fears of melting Arctic ice, expanding ozone holes and other premonitions of world-death—belie a sort of cultural gentrification of what used to be fringe preoccupations. *Left Behind* takes this a bit further, appealing to our apocalyptic vanity. After a fashion, it's flattering to imagine we are the last, worst generation.

LaHaye and Jenkins play to these conceits. As evangelicals they must. We are no longer the yokels of 300 years ago, fearful sinners in the hand of an angry God, or buying into the promise of eternal abundance. Instead, LaHaye and Jenkins put apocalyptic fantasy into a now-familiar narrative structure of the little guy vs. government/military/industrial complex evil.

[Editor's note: For more on LaHaye's career in the culture wars, see "Right Wing Confidential," by Joel Bleifuss, August 21, 1994.] *Left Behind*'s two main characters, Steele and Williams, cover both ends of the male reader spectrum, allowing powerless cubicle monkeys to envision themselves grappling with faceless, omnipotent evil. If they find Jesus along the way, so much the better.

As literature, *Left Behind* rests south of the middlebrow—entertainment meant to be consumed in great gulps on the train ride to work. As Christian propaganda, however, it is brilliantly simple. Just as evangelical pamphleteer Jack Chick learned that his comix-style fundamentalist polemics drew more readers than text-heavy tracts, LaHaye and Jenkins realized the secular trappings of the action novel would suck in people who might be leery about opening a Bible on the bus. Yet unlike the psychopathological Chick comix, which present one and only one way to God, the *Left Behind* novels use a soft-sell approach—a sort of vanilla evangelism—to finding Christ. While fully convinced of their righteousness, LaHaye and Jenkins don't wish to offend and potentially lose any souls—at first. Evangelists realize that this is a fallen world, and consequently they have to be sneakier about their soul-winning. How to do it? As the 19th-century clergyman Rowland Hill put it, "The devil should not have all the best tunes."

Like Christian rock and rap music, *Left Behind* is an assimilationist approach to godless American culture, though it does a better job of it. Most Christian rock stars, for example, possess a disturbingly sexless aura, denying what gives rock its potency. *Left Behind*, while not providing full frontal nudity and John Woo bloodfeasts, keeps the intrigue, action and (literally) virginal romance at a temperature reasonable for contemporary, nonreligious tastes.

Ah, is that the scent of hypocrisy in the air? Not especially. *Left Behind* faithfully portrays white evangelical culture. None of the characters are turning away from much more than serendipitously successful careers (which, curiously, continue unimpeded for the first several books, with Antichrist allowing Steele and Williams to keep their jobs, so long as they tone down the testifying), and their previous wrongdoings amount to little more than lusting after flight attendants and having a little drinkypoo now and again. Buck Williams is even a 30-year-old virgin, for crying out loud. As the series progresses, however, fundamental fanaticism becomes the norm. Quoting modern dispensationalist/conspiracy theory throughout, through their

portrayal of Antichrist, the authors display a heady distrust of one-world government, the United Nations, ecumenism, rampant Romanism and similar bugbears of the fringe religious right. You know. The kooks.

But this is just fiction, remember? LaHaye and Jenkins are just trying to tell a good story. They're not *those* kind of Christians.

Optimistic fatalism of a Millerite sort pervades the series, a sure suspense-killer. When the end is preordained, and only two options—life and death—are offered, why should anything else matter? Death doesn't matter. Pain doesn't matter. Procreation doesn't matter. The world is evaporating around them, friends are falling left and right, and the human race is up to its ass in death, war, disease and privation. That's okay, because Jesus is Lord, and Jesus will win. End of story: page one, book one.

In the *Left Behind* land of make-believe, optimistic fatalism makes sense, but here in the real world, among the dispensationalists, it's a frightening reality. Yes, those fellows who come knocking at your door with a King James Bible and the fresh scent of Lysol about them want to save your soul, but they're also convinced that nothing else is worth saving in this sorry world since Jesus is coming soon. ■

Dan Kelly has written for *The Baffler* and *Feral House*, and is the author of a self-published essay collection, *Cop Porn*. His Web site, <http://members.aol.com/mrcrash33/rectory.html>, features more blasphemy.

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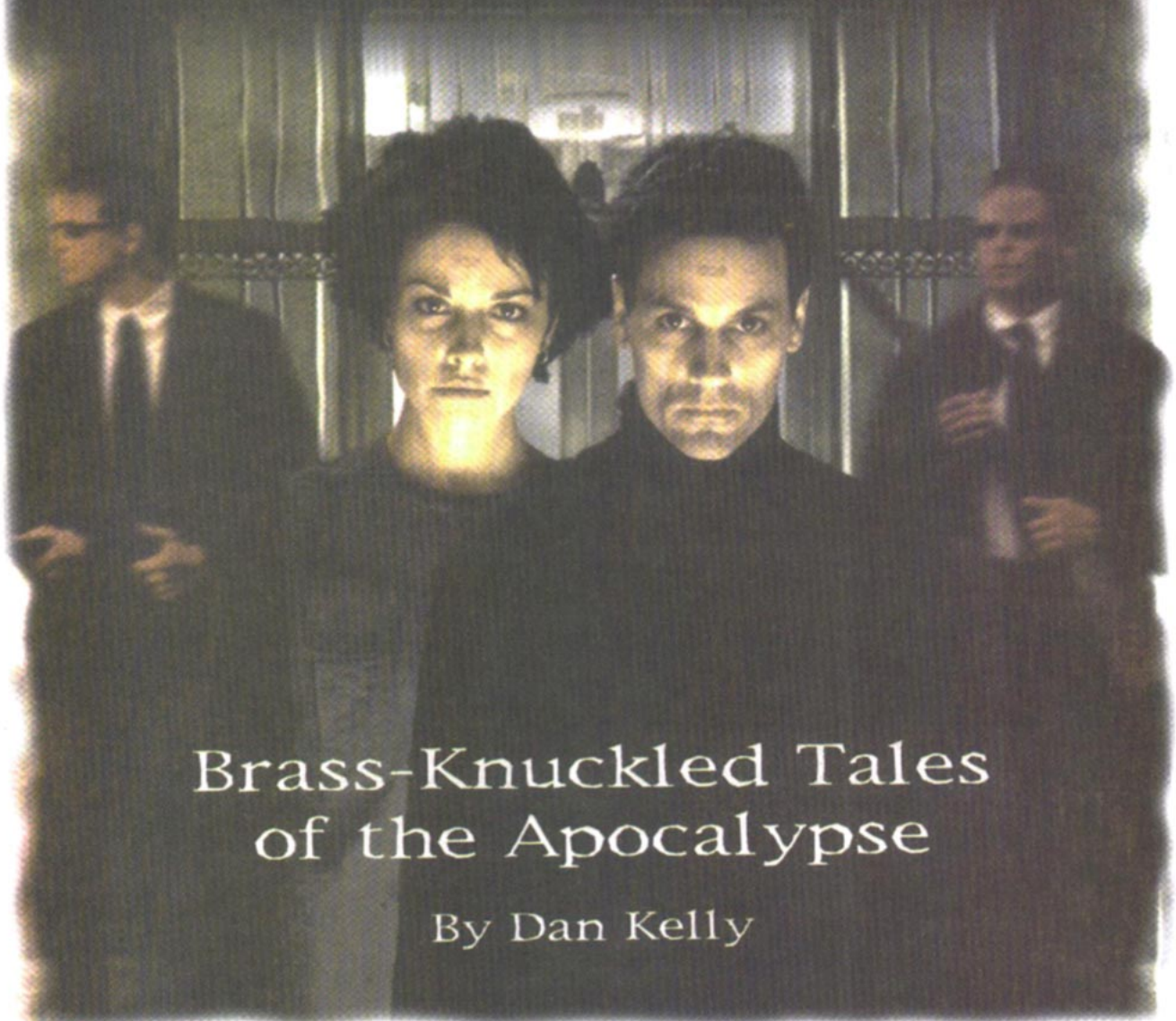


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PULP PROPHECY



Brass-Knuckled Tales of the Apocalypse

By Dan Kelly

Back in the 1830s, an upstate New York preacher and former atheist by the name of William Miller announced that Jesus was coming on a white horse to judge the living and the dead—and soon. Miller's faith in biblical prophecy was so implicit he provided an exact date for Christ's return: April 3, 1843. Rather than locking the good reverend in a rubber room, Miller's congregation sold all they owned, donned white sheets and waited in graveyards for the Lord's debut.

Two years and several date changes later, the Millerites realized the Son o' God wasn't showing up until He was damn good and ready. Many of Miller's flock disavowed the erroneous preacher, but few rejected his belief system—dispensationalism—which claims the end times are foreordained in the Bible. Many, in fact, established branches

of what later became the Adventist Church. Indeed, the Millerites' single-mindedness stands as a stirring tribute to the indomitability of the human spirit, and a chilling testament to the blithe heedlessness of the "saved."

The Millerites are long gone, but the millenarian id soldiers on—perhaps nowhere more openly than on major chain store bookshelves. "On November 14, will you be in line for *The Mark*?" blares a headline on the inside front cover of a recent issue of *Publishers Weekly*. A portent of the end of days? Nah, just the eighth installment of the wildly popular "Left Behind" series of apocalyptic potboilers, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Now, don't chuckle at the sound of the phrase "Christian fiction." *The Indwelling*, the seventh in the series, is the first Christian-themed novel

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